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Headlines friday 17 march 2023

- **Industrial action Teaching unions and UK government agree to pay talks**
- **Live NEU and other teaching unions agree to ‘intensive talks’ with government in hope of ending strikes**
- **NHS Junior doctors in England on cusp of pay talks with government**
- **Passport Office Workers across UK to strike for five weeks over pay**



Members of the National Education Union striking over pay and conditions in Truro this week. Photograph: Benjamin Gilbert/Sopa/Rex/Shutterstock

Schools

Teaching unions in England begin talks with government as strikes paused

Discussions to focus on teacher pay, conditions and workload reduction, amid two-week ‘period of calm’

Richard Adams Education editor
Fri 17 Mar 2023 08.07 EDTFirst published on Fri 17 Mar 2023 05.17 EDT

Intensive negotiations between the government and teaching unions in England are under way, holding out the possibility of a deal over teachers’ pay after a damaging series of strikes.

The talks between the teaching union leaders and Gillian Keegan, the education secretary, started on Friday and are expected to continue over the weekend, in a sign of the government’s willingness to end the dispute.

The National Education Union, which held two days of strikes in England earlier this week, said it would “create a period of calm for two weeks” and hold back from announcing further industrial action to allow talks to go ahead, ending an impasse with the Department for Education (DfE).

The parties, including the National Association of Head Teachers, the Association of School and College Leaders and the NASUWT teachers union, have agreed a vow of silence on the progress of negotiations through the media.

A joint statement by the two sides said talks would focus on teacher pay, conditions and workload reduction.

The DfE had refused to start negotiations while strikes were scheduled but the end of the NEU’s current round of industrial action opened a window for talks to begin.

Keegan has held separate discussions with the leaders of other unions, including the National Association of Head Teachers and the Association of School and College Leaders, with the DfE hinting that teachers risked missing out on a pay deal similar to that being negotiated with NHS workers.

The negotiations will not include representatives from college unions, with the Association of Colleges chief executive, David Hughes, saying they had been “left on the sidelines looking in” on the talks.

“Pay in colleges is just as important, particularly now that colleges are part of the public sector,” said Hughes, who noted that further education college lecturers were already paid £8,000 to £10,000 less than their counterparts in schools.

“Poor pay is now holding back colleges from offering training and skills because they cannot recruit and retain people to teach,” he said.

“Better pay for college lecturers would unleash capacity to meet the wider labour market needs. If the government is serious about prioritising jobs and

opportunity, then the education secretary needs to get to the negotiating table with colleges as a matter of urgency.”

In recent weeks the governments in Scotland and Wales have held intensive talks with the teaching unions, with Scottish teachers accepting a pay offer rising to 14.6% in January.

In Wales the NEU paused strikes to consider a “constructive” offer of an extra 3% immediately and a fully funded 5% pay rise from September.

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Politics live with Andrew SparrowPolitics

No 10 refuses to give details of how £4bn pay deal for health workers will be funded – as it happened

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Junior doctors hold placards on a picket line outside St Mary's hospital in London on Tuesday. Photograph: Alastair Grant/AP

Doctors

Junior doctors in England on cusp of pay talks with government

BMA optimistic discussions will begin in coming days after deal agreed between government and other health unions

- Politics live - latest updates

Kiran Stacey *Political correspondent*
Fri 17 Mar 2023 05.20 EDTLast modified on Fri 17 Mar 2023 12.42 EDT

Junior doctors could enter pay talks with the government imminently after ministers agreed a deal with other health unions.

Vivek Trivedi, the co-chair of the British Medical Association's junior doctor committee, told BBC Radio 4's Today programme he was optimistic

discussions would begin in the coming days following the agreement between the government and unions including Unison, the GMB and the Royal College of Nursing.

As part of the deal that was announced on Thursday, health staff in England will get a 5% pay rise from April as well as a one-off bonus. Unions welcomed the government's willingness to renegotiate pay, although questions remain over whether the extra money will be taken from existing NHS budgets.

Trivedi told Today: "It's disappointing that it's taken strike action to have meaningful discussion but it's promising that they're able to move forward and I only hope we're able to do that in our own dispute."

He added: "It does look like we'll be able to set something up in the near future."

Chart

Dominic Raab, the deputy prime minister, said junior doctors were being offered a similar deal to that made to other health unions. "I think the similar offer is on the table," he said. "I think it would be good [for] the unions to meet with the health secretary as he's offered, and I hope that we can resolve that issue as well."

Trivedi's comments come a day after the BMA exchanged letters with the health secretary, Steve Barclay, in a move seen as a precursor to begin negotiations, which could start as soon as Friday.

The two sides, however, remain some way off on exact terms. The BMA has asked the government to agree a 35% pay rise to make up for real-terms cuts since 2008-09 – something Barclay has called "not affordable".

Barclay said on Thursday: "We have offered the same terms to the junior doctors that were accepted by the other trade unions and that is what I hope the junior doctors will respond to."

Other health leaders on Friday expressed optimism this week's deal might finally bring to an end the winter's rolling strikes, which have led to cancelled appointments, delayed treatments and reduced ambulance services.

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Rachel Harrison, the national secretary at the GMB, told the BBC on Friday: "What this pay offer essentially does is settle the issue of pay for the coming year. We will see what happens the following year when it comes to the pay review body process, and whether that is performed in a way that we would like to see."

The government had previously budgeted for a 3.5% pay rise, leading to questions about where the extra funding would come from.

Harrison said unions had been told the extra money for this year would not come from existing health budgets. However, ministers have guaranteed only that "frontline services" will not be affected. A Treasury source said on Thursday they would have to pay for the rest through efficiency savings or bid for more funding in the coming months.

Julian Hartley, the chief executive of NHS Providers, said: "We need to find that additional 2% for NHS budgets as new money, not from existing NHS

budgets when the NHS is currently being asked to make significant efficiency gains already."

Raab said: "That will be for the health secretary and the chancellor in the usual way to consider [but] I think the expectation will be the budget set there is enough resource."

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People queueing outside a passport office in Peterborough during a strike last year. Photograph: Joe Giddens/PA

Passport Office

Passport Office workers across UK to strike for five weeks over pay

Members of PCS union to take part in action from early April likely to have 'significant impact' on delivery times

Jamie Grierson
@JamieGrierson
Fri 17 Mar 2023 14.29 EDTFirst published on Fri 17 Mar 2023 05.35 EDT

Passport Office workers are to strike for five weeks in an escalation of a dispute over jobs, pay and conditions.

More than 1,000 members of the Public and Commercial Services (PCS) union working in passport offices in England, Scotland and Wales will take part in the action from 3 April to 5 May.

Those working in Durham, Glasgow, Liverpool, London, Newport, Peterborough and Southport will strike from 3 April to 5 May, while those in Belfast will do so from 7 April to 5 May.

The union said the action was a “significant escalation” of its long-running dispute, warning it was likely to have a “significant impact” on the delivery of passports as the summer holidays approach.

The PCS general secretary, Mark Serwotka, said: “This escalation of our action has come about because, in sharp contrast with other parts of the public sector, ministers have failed to hold any meaningful talks with us, despite two massive strikes and sustained, targeted action lasting six months.

“Their approach is further evidence they’re treating their own workforce worse than anyone else. They’ve had six months to resolve this dispute, but for six months have refused to improve their 2% imposed pay rise, and failed to address our members’ other issues of concern.

“They seem to think if they ignore our members, they’ll go away. But how can our members ignore the cost of living crisis when 40,000 civil servants are using food banks and 45,000 of them are claiming the benefits they administer themselves?

“It’s a national scandal and a stain on this government’s reputation that so many of its own workforce are living in poverty.”

The action proposed by Passport Office workers comes after months of strikes over pay in other sectors, such as rail, London Underground, schools, regional BBC journalism and universities.

On Thursday, unions representing healthcare workers in England agreed a final pay offer with the government, which if accepted is hoped to bring an end to strikes by nurses and ambulance workers.

Mike Clancy, the general secretary of Prospect, thousands of whose civil service members went on strike this week, said there was a sense that the government’s own workers were often at the “back of the queue” when it

came to pay deals, and he urged ministers to arrange talks to end industrial action "as early as possible next week".

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He said the government should now be looking to make sure the format of its pay deal with the NHS will "read across to its own employees" in the civil service.

Clancy told the Guardian: "There is a recognition in the NHS terms that 22/23 was exceptional and has to still be addressed, and that 23/34 is still a very difficult year, even if there is government hope that there will be a drop in inflation … There has to be a similar structure, and we will then talk about the amounts.

"What I can't say is that I've got an invite to talks and we have been complaining in public about the failure of the government to respond in this way for its own civil servants. But what has been pretty clear in the overall mood music is that the government would want to sort the NHS first, and I think the teaching unions are having conversations.

"I really now expect an invite from the government to talk about its own employees, and that better be as early as possible next week. What we have

to judge is whether there is sufficient for us to enter discussions and take a view on what we do in terms of our own action.”

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2023.03.17 - Spotlight

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- **Iraq war: 20 years on Abuses and intelligence failures hang over UK**
- **Alexander Skarsgård ‘There’s a politeness to Swedes. It’s a facade. Deep down we’re animals’**
- **‘I’m not a doctor just FYI’ The influencers paid to hawk drugs on TikTok**



Rose Gentle, the bereaved mother of Fusilier Gordon Gentle, who was killed while serving with the 1st Battalion, Royal Highland Fusiliers in Basrah on 28 June 2004. Photograph: Murdo MacLeod/The Guardian

Iraq war: 20 years onMilitary

‘It never goes away’: three Britons on how the Iraq war changed their lives

A mother whose son was killed in Basra, a senior non-commissioned officer with PTSD and a psychiatric nurse reflect 20 years on

Kevin Rawlinson
Fri 17 Mar 2023 02.30 EDTLast modified on Fri 17 Mar 2023 13.56 EDT

The Iraq war left a profound mark on the UK. It forced the country to face up to its role, having initially helped rid Iraq of a brutal dictator, in the years of deadly chaos that followed. At home, meanwhile, it acted as the catalyst for one of the most popular domestic antiwar movements the country has seen.

The conflict also left many people in the UK asking: could they ever really trust their political leaders at a time of national crisis again? And could it ever be right to send young men and women to war without having first exhausted all peaceful means – and without a clear idea of what they were even meant to achieve once they got there?

Twenty years on from the Iraq invasion, some of those who were involved have been reflecting on how it changed their lives.

“It never goes away. It’s there from the minute you shut your eyes to the minute you wake up.”

Rose Gentle is talking about the death of her 19-year-old son, Fusilier Gordon Gentle, who served in Iraq with the 1st Battalion of the Royal Highland Fusiliers. But her words could be those of any one of the millions of people directly touched by the conflict.

The course of Gentle’s life was changed irreversibly when she learned her son had been killed by a roadside bomb in Basra on 28 June 2004. He was out on a patrol that was later found to have been underequipped for the job.

She went from leading a quiet family life to running a high-profile campaign for justice for her son and others. “The more I heard about Iraq, [the more] I thought there’s something not right. And that’s what triggered me off to start the campaign to find out why we went into Iraq,” she says in an interview marking Monday’s 20th anniversary of the invasion.

Gentle is a founder member of Military Families Against the War, which campaigned for the Chilcot inquiry, as well as for better equipment for those who were still serving there.

Her campaigning led her to stand as an independent in the 2005 general election against Adam Ingram – then the armed forces minister – in the East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow constituency. She also tried to sue Tony Blair, the prime minister who sent her son to war.

She says she felt she needed to stand to give voice to the families of the bereaved. Political leaders “don’t want to hear the true stories of how the

families have been fighting and how they've suffered. So I thought: 'Well, if it's the only way we can do this, we'll do it'. People in East Kilbride were absolutely fantastic. They were. A lot of people were so supportive".

Gentle looks back over the campaigning life Iraq led her to live. Had Gordon survived Iraq – or had he never been deployed in the first place – would she have found another cause to throw her energy into or would it have been different?

"If he was still here and hadn't been in the army, yeah, probably my life would have been different. It probably would have been. This was just something I felt I had to do for my son … I probably would've had a quiet life."

Now though, she says, her campaigning days are over – replaced by private efforts to bring support to fellow bereaved relatives. But they could start up again if more revelations about the UK's involvement in Iraq were to come out.

Her son was one of 179 British armed forces personnel or MoD civilians killed in Iraq, while more than 3,000 were wounded. Some of those who made it home physically unscathed were left asking themselves: 'Why them and not me?'



Craig Mealing photographed in Essex. Photograph: David Levene/The Guardian

Craig Mealing, a senior non-commissioned officer, served two tours in Iraq as a combat engineer. "I've been quite lucky – no one in my section's been injured. We've just had close calls.

"And other people have, obviously, not been as lucky. Walking away with it, you get a bit of guilt as well: that other people have suffered. I managed to walk away with it and other people haven't been that lucky. And you get that guilt trip a bit."

Years later, and having retired in 2013, he found himself struggling with his mental health. "When I left the army, I started to get into trouble, basically. My relationship broke down … And then, I went to Combat Stress [a veterans' charity] in 2015 and I started the programme there."

If he could say just one thing to his compatriots, it would be to remember that those who served in conflicts such as Iraq still need their help. If he could say just one thing to his comrades, he would plead with them to come forward and get that help if they could use it.

The key to working out a coping mechanism for his own post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), he says, was the discovery of a potter's wheel at Combat Stress.

He says he was "intrigued" by the TV programme The Great Pottery Throw Down: "It's something I've watched in the background and I thought I'd have a go … and I just found [pottery] quite relaxing. For me, it's a sense of achievement, I find it a bit rewarding and you get something out of it … It's a way of having a sense of purpose. It's my way of grounding myself as well."

He says he was asked to apply to the Channel 4 show, but declined for fear of putting undue pressure on himself and losing his hobby as a means of controlling his condition. "It becomes a chore, not a pleasure. The pottery's there as a way of helping me relax. If I turn it into a business or something

like that, or take it up full-time, it then becomes a chore and it takes that enjoyment away."

He does not want a return to the bad times. "This year has probably been one of my best years. But, the years before that, I was a mess. A real mess."

Specific experiences took Mealing back to his time in Iraq. "The heat was just horrendous. It was just so hot. I work in the port London Gateway; there's an oil refinery there. If I smell on a hot day, the oil, it brings me back into that position again; brings me back to remembering stepping off the plane.

"All I can remember associating to Iraq is stepping off the plane and smelling the oil because it was just constantly burning everywhere – in the distance, the oil fields – and that's all you could smell was thick oil. And that still affects me now. If I smell that it brings me back into that place."

Part of the experience in Iraq, Mealing explains, was a cocktail of emotions. It may not be as readily acknowledged in public, but one of those is excitement.

"I've been in situations where it is exciting," says Mealing. "But, when you reflect on it, you go: 'Oh my effing God, that was close'. At the time, you don't think like that, you go into autopilot. It is exciting. It's the time afterwards, when you have time to reflect, you start to go 'shit that is quite close'."

Referring to the onset of his PTSD, he adds: "I can't put it down to a single incident that has triggered that. But I think that a number of instances over the time have made me a bit more wary of stuff. And I think, as you get older, you become more fearful. As a child, as a 16-year-old, it's exciting. As you get older, when you have children and responsibilities, that fear starts to creep in a bit more."

Mark, whose surname has been withheld to protect his identity, served two tours as a psychiatric nurse, helping individual personnel process their emotions and advising commanders on how to look after their charges' mental health.

“There was that sense of excitement, it’s a sense of doing what it’s all about, I guess,” he says of being deployed to join the initial invasion force in 2003.

“You think of my day-to-day job in Germany: a lot of routine; rocking up at the office, having a clinic. Life gets a little bit samey sometimes. Whereas, when you deploy, there’s a lot of unknown elements to it … You don’t quite know the conditions … There were risks there.

“The excitement is the sense of a bit of adventure, a bit of an unknown quantity. It’s away from the normal routine of things.”

But he echoes some of Mealing’s thoughts about reflecting later on what exactly happened. Even though he was an experienced member of the armed forces by 2003, having served in several theatres before deployment to Iraq, he admits he had been somewhat foolhardy as he pushed across the border.

He says his second tour was marked more by fear of a people who no longer wanted the British army in Iraq and of insurgents who would put their positions under indirect fire – rounds often falling close to where he was holding his clinic.

Mark left the army, but his job means he helps fellow veterans look after their mental health. “In my contact with the people I come across within Combat Stress, I can use my experiences to empathise with the guys and girls who have experienced and who have suffered. And I can bring that to the table – I’ve had that shared experience with them. I was there. I know what they’re talking about.”

Referring to his comrades, he says he would expect to see the normal range of mental health issues, albeit the army’s vetting and training processes usually mean lower levels of symptoms such as psychosis. PTSD is, of course, one.

But did Iraq change him personally? “This is the kind of stuff when I would have done briefings, I would talk about; how our experiences change us. Not only when servicemen and women deploy – they change because of their experience – but [also] the people we leave behind, – wives, families – they change because of what they’re going through. We all change.

"Yes, I'm sure I've changed. I'd like to think I've changed for the better, in the sense of I'm a bit more worldly experienced. I've seen the world at large and I've witnessed these conflicts that have happened around the world. And then, obviously, in Iraq."

There is one reflection on the conflict that united Gentle, Mealing and Mark: pride.

In 2017, Gentle was awarded an honorary degree by the University of Glasgow for her campaigning. At the time, she declared herself delighted. So, did it make her proud to have honoured her son? "I'm not the one who's done proud. It's Gordon who's done proud. Gordon's done us proud," she says.

For Mealing, it is the feeling that he did the job it was his duty to do. "I'm quite proud of what I've achieved because not many people have done what I've done. And people take the piss out of me at work. They go: 'Oh, Uncle Albert over there, with his war stories.' But I'm quite proud of what I achieved. Iraq, whether I agreed or disagreed with it, I look back now and think to myself: 'Us, as a British army, we did the best we could have done.'"

Iraq left its stamp on the history of the UK like few other conflicts have. As Mark puts it: I'm glad I was there, part of history."

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A US soldier walks past Iraqi detainees standing behind a wired fence, at Abu Ghraib prison outside Baghdad in 2004. Photograph: Damir Šagolj/Reuters

Iraq war: 20 years onIraq

Abuses and intelligence failures hang over UK 20 years after Iraq war

Moral reputation of UK intelligence and military has been tarnished for a generation

Dan Sabbagh *Defence and security editor*
Fri 17 Mar 2023 01.00 EDTLast modified on Fri 17 Mar 2023 19.42 EDT

It was a war that began in extreme controversy and during which the moral reputation of British intelligence and the nation's armed forces was tarnished for a generation, long after the last of the fighting stopped.

Before a shot was fired in Iraq by the US-led coalition, British intelligence, led by MI6, produced flawed evidence about Saddam Hussein's supposed

weapons of mass destruction, which in turn was simplified and amplified by then prime minister Tony Blair, including in his foreword to the notorious Iraq dossier of September 2002. But it was not true and proven not to be so after the initial invasion was over.

Sir John Chilcot, in his 2016 inquiry, concluded that not only had Blair gone too far but the intelligence community did little to hold Downing St back. Intelligence had become politicised, reflecting an ingrained belief that the Iraqi dictator must have been hiding something.

The intelligence failures lingered long in the memory, prompting widespread scepticism about agency predictions made in the run-up to the war in Ukraine, in particular that Vladimir Putin would, without doubt, order an invasion. But others argue that the impact was more profound than that.

Dan Jarvis, who served as a major in the Parachute Regiment in Iraq and is now an Labour MP, said: "Rather than fading away, the damage done to public trust in 2003 has only become clearer with time. In retrospect it may have been only a milestone in a wider decline, but it has echoes in everything from the Brexit debate to the response to Covid – and the disastrous impunity of Boris Johnson."

The Saddam regime was defeated in a little over three weeks of conventional military war, and the coalition was often welcomed by Iraqi civilians liberated from a repressive dictatorship. But it was not long before stories of abuse and torture emerged, war crimes that, however isolated, could not readily be dismissed.

Baha Mousa, 26, an Iraqi who was working in a hotel as a receptionist, was detained by British soldiers from the 1st Battalion Queen's Lancashire Regiment in Basra in September 2003. The case was to become notorious.

Thirty six hours later he was found dead with 93 external injuries, his face bloodied and distorted, his torso with swathes of bruising and "a strangulation line across the throat", according to AT Williams, who wrote a book about the grisly event.

Nor was it an isolated incident. A 2011 inquiry by Sir William Gage into Mousa's death said British soldiers inflicted "violent and cowardly" assaults on Iraqi civilians, subjecting them to "gratuitous" kickings and beatings – and that there was widespread ignorance of what was permitted in handling prisoners of war.

There were repeated incidents of hooding – where a bag is thrown over a detainee's head. The practice was banned in 1972 by Ted Heath, when he was prime minister, but some British soldiers admitted they were not aware of the order, suggesting a failure to enforce standards from the top.

Such accusations, remarkably, paled somewhat in comparison to what happened at the US-run prison at Abu Ghraib in April 2004, where an extraordinary and shameful catalogue of abuse was revealed.

Detainees were tortured and humiliated, often sexually as a bizarre set of photographs revealed. In one, a hooded Iraqi prisoner, with wires attached to his arms, was told he would be electrocuted if he stepped off the box he was standing on. Others showed unclothed prisoners, forced to simulate sex acts; in one case a US solider was photographed behind a pyramid of perhaps seven naked Iraqis.

Abu Ghraib was part of a moral corruption that emerged as the war on terror continued. Some of the issues highlighted went beyond Iraq – as demonstrated by a report from the UK parliament's intelligence and security committee, published as recently as 2018, which concluded that MI6 officers had on two occasions been party to mistreatment of prisoners, witnessed it on 13 occasions, and benefited from intelligence supplied from people suspected of being tortured nearly 200 times.

The all party committee said that "the UK saw itself as the poor relation to the US" and "was distinctly uncomfortable at the prospect of complaining". In other cases, MI6 was involved in abductions that led to suspected extremists being tortured, and such was the disgust that Eliza Manningham-Buller, the then head of MI5, complained about MI6's conduct to Blair and relations between the two agencies went into the deep freeze.

The establishment was reeling, but at one significant point the accusations also went too far. Allegations that British soldiers had murdered insurgents and mutilated their bodies after a firefight in Iraq in May 2004 were dismissed 10 years later by another official investigation, the al-Sweady inquiry. A British human rights lawyer had paid a middleman who found people willing to submit fictitious statements.

The fiasco prompted a dramatic pushback by Conservative ministers. A shutdown of the military unit investigating claims of abuse by British forces in Iraq followed in 2017. "This will be a relief for our soldiers who have had allegations hanging over them for too long," said defence secretary Michael Fallon.

An effort even followed to introduce an effective amnesty for British soldiers accused of war crimes while serving in Iraq, but the Overseas Operations Act eventually had to be amended to ensure that torture was exempted. But despite all the efforts to sweep the scandals under the carpet, the MoD was still quietly paying out compensation, paying several millions to settle 417 claims in the year to November 2021.

Martyn Day, senior partner at law firm Leigh Day, which brought many of the claims, said "it was depressing to see how commonly abuse was meted out by some British troops in a very casual way to ordinary Iraqis" and accused the UK government of "looked to obfuscate what had happened" by blaming "'compensation-seeking Iraqis' and 'tank-chasing lawyers".

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Alexander Skarsgård: ‘I’m quite mellow in my disposition.’ Photograph: Charlie Clift

Movies

Interview

Alexander Skarsgård: ‘There’s a politeness to Swedes. It’s a facade. Deep down we’re animals’

Ryan Gilbey

The actor talks about his new film, the explicit sci-fi horror Infinity Pool, why he gave up acting for eight years – and why he likes playing darker, more twisted characters

Fri 17 Mar 2023 02.00 EDTLast modified on Fri 17 Mar 2023 17.34 EDT

Alexander Skarsgård is an embarrassing creep who tries to coerce women into partying naked with him in hotel suites. Or so it would seem from the version of himself that he played last year in Donald Glover’s comedy

Atlanta. "I'm not saying that I dance around in a leopard-print thong in front of girls I don't know," he says. "But I'm also not saying that I *don't*. That kind of thing works really well when there's a kernel of truth in it."

This twinkling, teasing playfulness represents the default setting of the 46-year-old actor. His natural self-deprecation is what makes it so startling when he turns up on screen as another of the brutes and bastards that have become his speciality over the years. There was the violently abusive husband in the HBO series Big Little Lies and the violently abusive cop in War on Everyone; a racist in Passing and a rapist in the Straw Dogs remake, as well as a sad, moustachioed sleazeball who sleeps with his partner's underage daughter in The Diary of a Teenage Girl. Eric, the vampire he played across all seven series of True Blood, was an absolute catch by comparison.

It could even be argued that Skarsgård looks lost or vague in those roles that don't supply some darkness to temper his natural sheen. He was ferocious as a mud-caked proto-Hamlet in Robert Eggers's wild Viking epic The Northman, but as the yodelling vine-swinger in The Legend of Tarzan, there was none of the usual depth present behind his beauty. Whereas his character in the new satirical horror Infinity Pool – directed by Brandon Cronenberg, son of David – is up to his disbelieving eyes in vanity, amorality and rancid privilege.

Skarsgård plays a novelist called James living off the wealth of his wife, Em (Cleopatra Coleman), and struggling to write a second book six years after his debut. In search of inspiration, he and Em visit a luxurious resort in an unnamed country. What begins as a taunting comedy about the awfulness of the 1% veers off into extremity when the couple fall in with the hedonistic Gabi (Mia Goth) and her partner, Alban (Jalil Lespert). All it takes for the impressionable James to be hooked by these reprobates is a few compliments from Gabi followed by a sex act shown in graphic detail. "My job is so hard," the actor says with a smirk.

Cronenberg and Skarsgård are both the sons of talented men. (Skarsgård's father is Stellan Skarsgård who, like him, is part of the Lars von Trier Cinematic Universe.) Director and actor also have a certain placid temperament in common. "There's a politeness to Canadians and Swedes," says Skarsgård. "But it's all just a fucking facade. Deep down we're animals. We're just very good at concealing it." He gestures at me. "Brits too. It's all down there, though. You can just open the tap and let it out. That's what this movie does."

Even as the film descends into gruesome horror, Skarsgård remains committed to the idea of his character as a show pony with delusions of being a stallion. "James is arm candy. His wife buys him all these expensive clothes. The two of them look like something out of a travel brochure: the perfect couple on vacation. And he's trying to play that part while wanting also to be this serious author. But he's not a Charles Bukowski, he's not tormented and twisted. He isn't in touch with the darker side of his personality."

That changes when James finds himself facing the death penalty after accidentally killing a local farmer. He is assured by the police that there is a way out: for a hefty price, a clone of him can be created to take the fall on his behalf. This is no dumb beast, however; the sacrificial lamb will possess all his memories and feelings. It will, in effect, be indistinguishable from him. In a film featuring explicit sex and violence, there is still nothing quite as unnerving as the moment James encounters his own double as it wakes with a shocked gasp in a vat of red goo.



Skarsgård in True Blood. Photograph: Moviestore collection Ltd/Alamy

“The film company gave me a prosthetic of the clone’s face with all that goo round it,” he says, shaking his head. “It’s incredibly disturbing. What am I meant to do with it? Should I just hang it on the wall? Put it in the fridge?” He decided to go down the practical joke route. “When I have guests over, I’ll hide it in different places around the house.”

Would he take the clone option himself, I wonder? “One hundred per cent! I don’t blame James for going to the ATM. But it opens up other questions. If the clone retains all his memories, then how will he ever know that he is not the clone? Maybe they’re killing the real James. That fascinated me, and I love that there’s no answer in the movie. To throw another wrench in the works: maybe James has even been to the island already. Maybe he’s done this sort of thing before.”

These questions of authenticity, dilution and duplication are especially intriguing for an actor who proposed that twisted alternate version of himself in Atlanta, and who claims to suffer even now from impostor syndrome. Had you been present in 2008 on the set of Generation Kill, the HBO Iraq war mini-series written by the creators of The Wire and shot in Namibia, Mozambique and South Africa, you might have noticed him sitting off to one side between takes, quietly totting up figures with a pen and paper. “It

was my first big job," he explains. "I was so convinced they were going to fire me that I started calculating the cost of recasting the role once they realised I wasn't good enough. A month or two in, I was still convinced that every time the phone rang, it was my agent saying: 'Pack your bags, you're not cutting it.' It was only when we'd done some big battle scenes that I knew it would be too expensive to replace me."

It wasn't as if he has a history of flunking, though there was the job in the Stockholm bakery that he was sacked from at the age of 16. "We were dipping little biscuits in chocolate for six hours a day in a basement and that was the only thing we got to do," he says pleadingly, as though mounting the case for his defence. "When you get chocolate on your fingers, it's tempting to put little stains on your buddy's white robes. That turned into a bit of a food fight." He smiles bashfully. Chocolate wouldn't melt in his mouth.

A few years earlier, he had abandoned a childhood acting career after feeling freaked out by all the attention he received. "When people recognised me, or I thought they did, it made me very uncomfortable. I also believed everything I heard about who I was. Most people at 13 have no idea who they are. I was going from a boy to a man, which is a crazy transformation anyway, but to do it while being in the spotlight was not healthy. That's why I didn't work for eight years." What could he learn now as an actor from his younger self? "There was a lot of joy," he says. "That makes me sound bitter now! But there was something innocent and lovely and wide-eyed. It's worth remembering that it can still be a big silly game."



On Becoming a God in Central Florida. Photograph: Everett Collection Inc/Alamy

His continuing appetite for comedy bears this out. He was a riot in the opening episode of On Becoming a God in Central Florida, where he played a dope who gets involved with a pyramid scheme before being eaten by an alligator. (His on-screen wife was Kirsten Dunst. For further proof that their marriages never end well, see Von Trier's apocalyptic Melancholia.) He also goofs around gloriously in the new season of Documentary Now!, in which he stars as a Werner Herzog-esque director shooting an epic in the Urals while simultaneously showrunning a US network comedy pilot called Bachelor Nanny. "I've met Herzog a few times over the years, but I don't know if he's seen this yet," he says, slightly sheepishly. "I'm curious to hear what he thinks."

It was in fact comedy that tempted Skarsgård back to acting again after all those years away. He was on holiday in Los Angeles in the early 00s when his father's agent suggested he try out for an audition. Six weeks later, he was pootling around New York in the back of a Jeep with Ben Stiller, pouting away happily as gormless Swedish model Meekus in Zoolander. Getting that job was such a breeze that he was crestfallen to be knocked back repeatedly in other Hollywood auditions. He returned to Sweden to

continue acting; another six years elapsed before Generation Kill kickstarted his US career.

These days, he seems somehow both ubiquitous and judicious. He is getting ready to make his directorial debut with The Pack, in which he and Florence Pugh star as documentary makers in Alaska. And he will return this month in the fourth and final season of Succession, which reportedly places even greater emphasis on Skarsgård's character, the tech bro Lukas Matsson. Another bad boy of sorts.



With Brian Cox and Kieran Culkin in Succession. Photograph: Graeme Hunter

"Quite a few of the projects I've chosen deal with the juxtaposition of someone trying to function in modern society while also dealing with that atavistic primal question of who he is deep down and what happens when that flares up and can't be suppressed any longer," he says. "It's incredibly cathartic to play those roles. Maybe because I'm quite mellow in my disposition. These darker, more twisted characters give me an opportunity to howl that primal scream and let it out, which I rarely do in everyday life."

James in Infinity Pool has his head turned by the tiniest compliment; Skarsgård knows that, for all his own protestations about refusing to read

what is written about him, he is just as susceptible to praise. “I really don’t read reviews,” he says. “That said, it’s so nice when people enjoy your work enough to come say something or take a photo. I’d prefer that to the alternative, which is crawling around in the mud for seven months and giving it everything and then it’s just … crickets. I like people appreciating what I’ve done. I’m a vain motherfucker!”

Infinity Pool is released on 24 March. The new series of Succession is on Sky Atlantic and NOW on 27 March.

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In exchange for hawking a health product, a patient influencer can expect to earn anywhere from ‘the low hundreds to a few thousand dollars’ per post. Photograph: apomares/Getty Images

US healthcare

‘I’m not a doctor just FYI’: the influencers paid to hawk drugs on TikTok

Many ‘patient influencers’ offer medical advice without always revealing ties to pharmaceutical companies



[Wilfred Chan](#)
Fri 17 Mar 2023 01.00 EDTLast modified on Fri 17 Mar 2023 14.39 EDT

A young TikTok user has long, wavy hair, glowing makeup and a radiant smile. She's slim and wants you to know exactly why: she's using Wegovy, a prescription drug originally developed to treat diabetes that's become a popular drug for weight loss.

In one clip, she picks up the medication from a pharmacy, lip-syncing to Cardi B, then demonstrates in a following clip how she injects it into her leg. A caption flashes across the screen: "I'm not a doctor just FYI." Moments later she advises her nearly 20,000 followers on how to get started on the drug. "Start on the 0.25 mg," she says directly into camera. "Work your way up with each dose. Do not skip doses. I do not want any of you feeling sick."

She's what's called a patient influencer. They have no medical training and claim that they're simply sharing their personal experiences with their TikTok and Instagram followers. But in this quickly growing and largely unregulated arena, it's gotten harder to tell when influencing crosses legal and ethical lines.

Many patient influencers offer prescription drug advice to their followers without always revealing their relationships with drug companies, according

to Erin Willis, a University of Colorado, Boulder, associate professor who authored a study about patient influencers released this week.

> We need to understand if this content is influencing patients and influencing doctors to prescribe certain medications

Since patient influencers often share highly personal, vulnerable stories about their own health conditions, audiences find them trustworthy: a 2020 survey by a Wego, a major patient influencer agency, found that 51% of respondents said they mostly or completely trusted patient influencers, compared with just 14% who said the same for lifestyle influencers. An accompanying blogpost explains: “These patient leaders have built a well-established foundation of authenticity and trust in their communities.”

In exchange for hawking a health product or service, a patient influencer can expect to earn anywhere from “the low hundreds to a few thousand dollars” per social media post, depending on the health condition and the size of their online following, according to Amrita Bhowmick, the chief community officer at Health Union, a marketing firm that bought Wego in 2021.

Patient influencers can do this thanks to some of the world’s most permissive laws on prescription drug marketing. The US is one of two countries (the other is New Zealand) that allow direct-to-consumer (DTC) ads for prescription drugs. Since 1997, the Food and Drug Administration has allowed drug companies to push prescription medications on American airwaves as long as the ads are truthful, explain what the drug has been approved to treat, mention its major risks, and contain a disclaimer like “talk to your doctor”. Studies find DTC ads lead to doctors prescribing them more – driving the market for these ads to nearly $7bn last year, industry statistics show.

There are no published figures on the size of the patient influencer industry – but all indications are that it’s booming, says Willis. Medical ad agencies are typically tight-lipped about using patient influencers, but “they’re all engaged in this practice … this is a strategy that the pharmaceutical companies have found that works,” she says. Last summer, Willis spoke at a

pharmaceutical marketing conference and asked the audience to raise their hands if they used patient influencers – nearly the whole room did.



There are no published figures on the size of the patient influencer industry – but all indications are that it's booming, says Willis. Photograph: Avishek Das/Sopa Images/Rex/Shutterstock

Part of what makes patient influencers effective is that they often push messaging further than what would be allowed on media like TV, where ads are far more closely scrutinized by regulators like the FDA and Federal Trade Commission. Willis calls patient influencing "an interactive form of advertising" that's "difficult to regulate, if it's been regulated at all". (In an emailed statement, an FDA spokesperson said the agency "takes its responsibilities seriously and will continue to monitor promotions and communications regarding prescription drugs through its surveillance operations, which include online platforms".)

Willis found that all 26 patient influencers she spoke to in her study viewed themselves as "experts" and framed their efforts as raising awareness by sharing their own experiences. But some said they had discussed medications beyond those that they had taken, and many said they had discussed medications with followers over private messages. It's those less visible kinds of content – including short-form and disappearing video – that

are particularly concerning to Willis: “We don’t actually really know what all patients are doing, or what content they’re posting, or if they’re disclosing their relationship with pharmaceutical companies.”

In an email to the Guardian, Health Union’s Bhowmick says the company recruits and approves its influencers, whom it calls “patient leaders”, based on their “existing online presence”, or their participation on message boards that Health Union has set up for specific medical conditions, such as Migraine.com. Bhowmick, who helped Willis analyze her findings, says the company shares Willis’s concerns and “works with all our patient leaders to ensure they follow our best practices and community rules in all online activities – such as not providing medical advice and adhering to FTC guidelines for sponsored activities”.

Right now, we can only take their word for it. While federal law requires pharmaceutical companies to disclose the amount of money they pay doctors, no such rule exists for patients. And if an influencer doesn’t reveal that they’re on a drug company’s payroll, there’s no way to tell if it’s an advertisement that should be subject to regulation.

On a recent TikTok post by the young Wegovy influencer, one of her followers commented: “I’ve been on it for 3 weeks and haven’t lost a single pound. Pls tell me it will start to work.”

The influencer responded: “Bump up the dose.” Another commenter complains: “Made me soooo sick. Projectile vomiting because I didn’t poop for 10-15 days at a time.” The TikToker replies: “Stoppp!!! Omg!! Did you do the .25 dose??” With no listed sponsorships on her profile, it’s not clear whether she’s broken any advertising rules.

And with the countless patient influencers out there – Health Union alone boasts a network of “over 100,000 patient leaders” – it’s hard to say how many social media users are dispensing unvetted medical advice, or making money while doing so.

A big problem, Willis says, is there remains an “alarming lack of research” on the industry – and that research is difficult because “no one’s willing to talk about it”.

“When you ask advertising professionals, they’re not going to tell you much because of NDAs that they sign,” she says. And in her most recent study, “none of the influencers I spoke to were going to get into the weeds of the relationship [with companies] or the contracts with me. My thought is, if nothing is wrong about the practice, then why isn’t more known about it?”

- This article was amended on 17 March 2023. An earlier version incorrectly attributed the assertion that influencers may not reveal their ties to drug companies to the study rather than to Willis’s own observations.

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2023.03.17 - Opinion

- **Why are women so marginalised by the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame?**
- **Two decades later, it feels as if the US is trying to forget the Iraq war ever happened**
- **When it comes to cancer drug side-effects, it's about what you'll tolerate to stay alive**
- **Putin enables the lifestyle of Russia's elite – until they lose faith, there is little hope of peace**



Fourth time lucky? Kate Bush on stage in 1986. Photograph: Fotex/Shutterstock

OpinionMusic

Why are women so marginalised by the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame?

Courtney Love

Barely 8% of its inductees are female. The canon-making doesn't just reek of sexist gatekeeping, but also purposeful ignorance and hostility

Fri 17 Mar 2023 04.00 EDTLast modified on Fri 17 Mar 2023 08.05 EDT

I got into this business to write great songs and have fun. I was a quick learner. I read every music magazine I could get my hands on and at 12, after digesting many issues of Creem, I decided to base my personality on Lester Bangs, the rock critic raconteur; his abiding belief in the transformative power of a great rock song matched mine. (I also obsessed over his running arguments with Lou Reed – they confounded me, but I loved it.) Artists and their songs shaped my life, my beliefs, my self-

conception as a musician – Patti Smith's growling Pissing in the River, Heart's Barracuda, the Runaways' Dead End Justice, which I still know every word of. But what no magazine or album could teach me or prepare me for was how exceptional you have to be, as a woman and an artist, to keep your head above water in the music business.

The magnificent Chuck D rapped: "Elvis is a hero to most, but he doesn't mean shit to me." I concur. Big Mama Thornton first sang Hound Dog, written for her (and possibly with her) in 1952, which later put the King on the radio. Sister Rosetta Tharpe covered it, too, hers being the fiercest version. Her song Strange Things Happen Every Day was recorded in 1944. It was these songs, and her evangelical guitar playing, that changed music for ever and created what we now call rock'n'roll.

When the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame started in 1983, you would have thought they might want to begin with Sister Rosetta, with those first chords that chimed the songbook we were now all singing from. The initial inductees were Chuck Berry, James Brown, Ray Charles, Little Richard, Sam Cooke, Fats Domino, the Everly Brothers, Buddy Holly, Jerry Lee Lewis and Elvis Presley; not a woman in sight. Sister Rosetta didn't get in until the Rock Hall was publicly shamed into adding her in 2018. (She was on a US postal stamp two decades before the Rock Hall embraced her.) Big Mama Thornton, whose recording of Ball'n'Chain also shaped this new form of music? Still not in. Today, just 8.48% of the inductees are women.


Long overlooked … Sister Rosetta Tharpe. Photograph: Chris Ware/Getty Images

The nominations for this year's class, announced last month, offered the annual reminder of just how extraordinary a woman must be to make it into the ol' boys club. (Artists become eligible 25 years after releasing their first record.) More women were nominated in one year than at any time in its 40-year history. There were the iconoclasts: Kate Bush, Cyndi Lauper, Missy Elliott; two women in era-defining bands: Meg White of the White Stripes and Gillian Gilbert of New Order; and a woman who subverted the boys club: Sheryl Crow.

Yet this year's list featured several legendary women who have had to cool their jets waiting to be noticed. This was the fourth nomination for Bush, a visionary, the first female artist to hit No 1 in the UK chart with a song she wrote (1979's Wuthering Heights), at 19. She became eligible in 2004. That year, Prince was inducted – deservedly, in his first year of eligibility – along with Jackson Browne, ZZ Top, Traffic, Bob Seger, the Dells and George Harrison. The Rock Hall's co-founder and then-chairman Jann Wenner (also the co-founder of Rolling Stone) was inducted himself. But Bush didn't make it on the ballot until 2018 – and still she is not in.

Never mind that she was the first woman in pop history to have written every track on a million-selling debut. A pioneer of synthesisers and music videos, she was discovered last year by a new generation of fans when Running Up That Hill (A Deal With God) featured in the Netflix hit Stranger Things. She is still making albums. And yet there is no guarantee of her being a shoo-in this year. It took the Rock Hall 30-plus years to induct Nina Simone and Carole King. Linda Ronstadt released her debut in 1969 and became the first woman to headline stadiums, yet she was inducted alongside Nirvana in 2014. Most egregiously, Tina Turner was inducted as a solo artist three decades after making the grade alongside her abuser, Ike.

Why are women so marginalised by the Rock Hall? Of the 31 people on the nominating board, just nine are women. According to the music historian Evelyn McDonnell, the Rock Hall voters, among them musicians and industry elites, are 90% male.

> The Rock Hall's canon-making doesn't just reek of sexist gatekeeping, but also purposeful ignorance and hostility

You can write the Rock Hall off as a "boomer tomb" and argue that it is building a totem to its own irrelevance. Why should we care who is in and who is not? But as scornful as its inductions have been, the Rock Hall is a bulwark against erasure, which every female artist faces whether they long for the honour or want to spit on it. It is still game recognising game, history made and marked.

The Rock Hall is a king-making force in the global music industry. (In the US, it is broadcast on HBO.) Induction affects artists' ticket prices, their performance guarantees, the quality of their reissue campaigns (if they get reissued at all). These opportunities are life-changing – the difference between touring secondary-market casinos opening for a second-rate comedian, or headlining respected festivals. The Rock Hall has covered itself in a sheen of gravitas and longevity that the Grammys do not have. Particularly for veteran female artists, induction confers a status that directly affects the living they are able to make. It is one of the only ways, and certainly the most visible, for these women to have their legacy and impact

honoured with immediate material effect. “These ain’t songs, these is hymns,” to quote Jay-Z.

The bar is demonstrably lower for men to hop over (or slither under). The Rock Hall recognised Pearl Jam about four seconds after they became eligible – and yet Chaka Khan, eligible since 2003, languishes with seven nominations. All is not lost, though – the Rock Hall is doing a special programme for Women’s History Month on her stagewear ...

What makes Khan’s always-a-bridesmaid status especially tragic is that she was, is and always will be a primogenitor. A singular figure, she has been the Queen of Funk since she was barely out of her teens. As Rickie Lee Jones said: “There was Aretha and then there was Chaka. You heard them sing and knew no one has ever done *that* before.”



Unworthy … Chaka Khan on stage in Toronto in 2018. Photograph: Rich Fury/Getty Images for Netflix

Yet Khan changed music; when she was on stage in her feathered kit, taking Tell Me Something Good to all the places it goes, she opened up a libidinal new world. Sensuality, Blackness: she was so very *free*. It was godlike. And nothing was ever the same.

But for all her exceptional talent and accomplishments – and if there is one thing women in music must be, it is endlessly exceptional – Khan has not convinced the Rock Hall. Her credits, her Grammys, her longevity, her craft, her tenacity to survive being a young Black woman with a mind of her own in the 70s music business, the bridge to Close the Door – none of it merits canonisation. Or so sayeth the Rock Hall.

The Rock Hall's canon-making doesn't just reek of sexist gatekeeping, but also purposeful ignorance and hostility. This year, one voter told Vulture magazine that they barely knew who Bush was – in a year she had a worldwide No 1 single 38 years after she first released it. Meg White's potential induction as one half of the White Stripes (in their first year of eligibility) has sparked openly contemptuous discourse online; you sense that if voters could get Jack White in without her, they would do it today. And still: she would be only the third female drummer in there, following the Go-Go's Gina Shock and Mo Tucker of the Velvet Underground. Where is Sheila E – eligible since 2001?

It doesn't look good for Black artists, either – the Beastie Boys were inducted in 2012 ahead of most of the Black hip-hop artists they learned to rhyme from. A Tribe Called Quest, eligible since 2010 and whose music forged a new frontier for hip-hop, were nominated last year and again this year, a roll of the dice against the white rockers they are forced to compete with on the ballots.

If so few women are being inducted into the Rock Hall, then the nominating committee is broken. If so few Black artists, so few women of colour, are being inducted, then the voting process needs to be overhauled. Music is a lifeforce that is constantly evolving – and they can't keep up. Shame on HBO for propping up this farce.

If the Rock Hall is not willing to look at the ways it is replicating the violence of structural racism and sexism that artists face in the music industry, if it cannot properly honour what visionary women artists have created, innovated, revolutionised and contributed to popular music – well, then let it go to hell in a handbag.

Courtney Love is a singer, musician and actor

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‘Countries outside the west have an interest in defending the principle that sovereignty should be respected.’ Photograph: Jim Lo Scalzo/EPA

OpinionUS politics

Two decades later, it feels as if the US is trying to forget the Iraq war ever happened

Stephen Wertheim

In framing the Ukraine war as a fight between democracy and autocracy, Biden shows that the US hasn’t learned from Iraq

Fri 17 Mar 2023 05.38 EDTLast modified on Fri 17 Mar 2023 05.40 EDT

Two decades ago, the United States invaded Iraq, sending 130,000 US troops into a sovereign country to overthrow its government. Joe Biden, then chairman of the Senate foreign relations committee, voted to authorize the war, a decision he came to regret.

Today another large, world-shaking invasion is under way. Biden, now the US president, recently traveled to Warsaw to rally international support for Ukraine's fight to repel Russian aggression. After delivering his remarks, Biden declared: "The idea that over 100,000 forces would invade another country – since world war II, nothing like that has happened."

The president spoke these words on 22 February, within a month of the 20th anniversary of the US military's opening strike on Baghdad. The White House did not attempt to correct Biden's statement. Reporters do not appear to have asked about it. The country's leading newspapers, the New York Times and Washington Post, ran stories that quoted Biden's line. Neither of them questioned its veracity or noted its hypocrisy.

Did the Iraq war even happen?

While Washington forgets, much more of the world remembers. The flagrant illegality of bypassing the United Nations: this happened. The attempt to legitimize "pre-emption" (really prevention, a warrant to invade countries that have no plans to attack anyone): this mattered, including by handing the Russian president, Vladimir Putin, a pretext he has used. Worst of all was the destruction of the Iraqi state, causing the deaths of hundreds of thousands of Iraqis and nearly 4,600 US service members, and radiating instability and terrorism across the region.

The Iraq war wasn't the only law- or country-breaking military intervention launched by the US and its allies in recent decades. Kosovo, Afghanistan and Libya form a tragic pattern. But the Iraq war was the largest, loudest and proudest of America's violent debacles, the most unwarranted, and the least possible to ignore. Or so it would seem. Biden's statement is only the latest in a string of attempts by US leaders to forget the war and move on.

Barack Obama, who came into the White House vowing to end the "mindset" that brought America into Iraq, decided that ending the war was good enough. "Now, it's time to turn the page," he said upon ordering the withdrawal of US forces from the country in 2011. Three years later, he sent troops back to Iraq to fight the Islamic State, which had risen out of the chaos of the invasion and civil war. It fell to Donald Trump to harness public

outrage over not only the war but also the refusal of elites to hold themselves accountable and make policy changes commensurate with the scale of the disaster.

Tempting though it is to look forward, not backward, the two are not mutually exclusive. And it might not be possible to reach a better future without understanding and appreciating why past attempts failed.

Ukrainians are now paying part of the price for western misdeeds. Russia's invasion was an act of blatant aggression. Moscow violated the UN charter and seeks to annex territory as part of an explicitly imperial project (in this respect unlike America's war in Iraq). Few people outside Russia have genuine enthusiasm for Putin's effort. Yet, much of the world sees the conflict as a proxy war between Russia and the west rather than a fight for sovereignty and freedom.

According to the Economist Intelligence Unit, approximately 58% of the world's population (excluding the two direct belligerents) lives in countries that are either neutral toward the war or lean toward Russia's side. Over the past year, support for the west's position has shrunk rather than grown: a handful of countries initially critical of Russia have shifted toward neutrality. Just last month, 39 countries did not support a UN resolution demanding that Russia withdraw its forces from Ukraine. Those that took a neutral stance, including China and India, represented an estimated 62% of the population of the global south.

Russia has not become the international pariah that western leaders claim it to be. Its economy has mostly weathered international sanctions, in part because the only countries willing to impose them are wealthy strategic partners of the US.

In this context, the White House should think about the message that Biden sent the world when he acted as though the war in Iraq never happened. When the US commits aggression, he implied, America's misdeeds do not count. Or perhaps, in saying that "since world war II, nothing like that has happened", Biden was thinking only of Europe but neglected to say so – in which case he treated the west's history as synonymous with the world's, effacing the experience of most of humanity. Either way, Biden conveyed

that support for Ukraine is mere power politics, not a principled cause in which all countries have a stake.

Hypocrisy alone is not the problem. Hypocrisy is all around us. What matters is whether we are working to build a better world.

When Biden memory-holes the obvious, he is not doing so. He is perpetuating the hegemonic project that brought the US into Iraq in the first place. He sends a similar message when he routinely frames the Ukraine war as a struggle of democracy against autocracy – as though countries deserve support against an unprovoked invasion only if the nature of their government meets with Washington's approval.

Countries outside the west have an interest in defending the principle that sovereignty should be respected. They have no interest in defending the principle that sovereignty is conditional. If Washington still claims the right to judge who is sovereign, then has it really renounced the right invade Iraq after all?

The US should admit past errors frankly and demonstrate, through words and deeds, that it has learned difficult lessons. No time is too late to build a better world. But even as the US takes the right side of the latest war, it is far from clear what lessons it has learned.

- Stephen Wertheim is a senior fellow in the American Statecraft Program at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace and a visiting lecturer at Yale Law School and Catholic University. He is the author of Tomorrow, the World: The Birth of US Global Supremacy

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Illustration: Eleanor Shakespeare/The Guardian

OpinionBreast cancer

When it comes to cancer drug side-effects, it’s about what you’ll tolerate to stay alive

Hilary Osborne



No matter how bad I feel, I have to remind myself that the treatment is working to reduce my tumour

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Nausea, diarrhoea, joint pain, fatigue, hair loss – the list of side-effects for most cancer drugs reads like symptoms of many illnesses in their own right. Before I had this disease, I would have considered making a GP appointment if I'd been suffering just some of the problems that I later came to just write off as simply the downside of being cured. The problem with all the side-effects the drugs have caused is that as they pile up, you can lose sight of why you are taking them.

It's not as if you're not warned that chemotherapy has its downsides. Before I started my treatment for breast cancer, the oncologist went through a long list of the things that I could experience as side-effects. It covered most of an A4 sheet of paper, and she appeared to have ticked every suggested problem as possible from the one or several of the cocktail of drugs I was going to be on.

At the beginning I focused on the ones that were common and prepared myself as much as I could to face them. I stocked up on sugar-free sweets to try to tackle the horrible taste and feelings of nausea I might develop, bought E45 cream to tackle dry skin and an eyebrow pencil and stencils for when my hair starting going. I researched using a cold cap to save my hair and bought paracetamols to tackle the headache it was likely to give me.

Visiting the websites of the likes of Cancer Research and Macmillan shows you how much of an issue side-effects are. In several paragraphs they describe the good the drug will do, how it is administered and how it works, then there are hundreds more lines on all the things you might suffer while taking it. But as time wore on I found myself going back to these pages for reassurances that what I was experiencing was normal.

Not all of what I experienced was normal, though. In the autumn I was sick, tired and in despair as I looked around and saw piles of hair that I'd shed. I was so exhausted that I felt as if I was dragging myself around. These problems all seemed like the side-effects of chemo – I'd sometimes move on to a new drug, and the sickness could be attributed to that. And the tiredness, which was like no other tiredness I had felt, was, I assumed, the effects of weeks of treatment. But rather than being temporary problems, it turned out that some of this was a sign that I'd been unlucky enough to develop some rare side-effects of one of my treatments.

As well as helping me fight the cancer, the immunotherapy drugs I was taking seem to have revved up my system and caused it to turn on some healthy bits of my body. My thyroid and adrenal glands are, to use what I think is the correct scientific terminology, knackered. For the rest of my life I will need to take tablets and to carry a syringe in case of an adrenal crisis.

I've been very unlucky, particularly with the adrenal problem. Things that I would have been upset to have been diagnosed with in the past – conditions that have a proper name and entitle me to free prescriptions for life – are the by-product of getting better. I have to remind myself that I've had the smooth with the rough.

Not all of the side-effects have been so bad. And the doctors and nurses have a fix for some of the worst temporary problems. After my first session I left the hospital with a collection of tablets – it was probably the worst party bag ever. But these drugs can have their own side-effects. An injection to boost white blood cell count can cause a lot of pain for some. I was lucky it didn't, but if I had been suffering, I could have taken a tablet for it, but that might have done damage to my stomach lining. So there was another tablet to address that. And on it goes.

Looking forward, there could be new side-effects from the drugs I'll be taking to attack any remaining cancer. I know they're not all going to happen – my eyebrow pencil and stencils turned out to be a waste of money, and the E45 cream wasn't any more useful than usual. The weird taste in my mouth changed according to what chemotherapy I was on, and I found ginger and hot water to be the best way to tackle it, rather than the sweets. The cold cap worked to some extent, but I lost about a third of my hair and I ended up buying a lot of hats.

I think there was probably part of me that thought by being prepared I could lessen the problems, but I know now that there's only so much you can do. You can do the research so you know what to expect, but you can waste a lot of worry on things that never happen. And the temporary effects seem less daunting now I've seen the bad taste and the hair loss come and go, but I feel more daunted by the prospect of lasting problems.

However, I remind myself that the doctors were right about the drugs reducing the tumour, and that they and the nurses had an answer to everything I encountered in the past. Ultimately, I am willing to suck up pretty much anything if it gives me a chance of surviving a killer disease. But I will never look at those leaflets that fall out of drugs packets in the same blase way that I did before.

- Hilary Osborne is the Guardian's money and consumer editor

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Putin with close confidant General Valery Gerasimov in front of a screen showing a map of Ukraine, Moscow, December 2021. Photograph: Mikhail Tereshchenko/Sputnik/AFP/Getty Images

OpinionUkraine

Putin enables the lifestyle of Russia’s elite – until they lose faith, there is little hope of peace

Olga Chyzh



Better targeting of wealthy Russians' ill-gotten gains abroad, combined with military defeats, might sway their loyalty

- Olga Chyzh is an assistant professor in the department of political science at the University of Toronto

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A year into its war, Russia is not any closer to accomplishing its objectives in Ukraine. And yet, to the surprise of western observers, neither battlefield losses nor economic misfortunes have softened its initial demands of demilitarisation and regime change in Ukraine. If there is one thing that's clear, even in the proverbial fog of war, it is that the end is nowhere in sight. Russia is not any more ready for good-faith negotiations today than on the first day of the invasion.

What makes the Putin regime so impervious to western sanctions? Why is Putin unconcerned with the human costs of war? And is there anything that would bring Russia to the negotiating table?

The answers to these questions have to do with the peculiar domestic context in which the Russian leader operates. Unlike democratic leaders, who stay in power by providing goods to the public, Putin's survival strategy consists of catering to a small number of political elites who make up his inner circle. As long as the inner circle remains happy, either as a result of direct payoffs and rents or policy, it has no incentive to replace him.

As it is, Putin's inner circle consists of two remaining power blocs: the top-ranking FSB intelligence officers and the heads of the military and defence structures. Though similar in their ideological positions – both are anti-democracy, and isolationist – the two blocs' ability to see eye to eye is impeded by their competition for power, resources and their leader's ear. Everything they have attained they owe to Putin.

In exchange, they pay back with loyalty and support and, when necessary, by doing some of his bidding. The FSB's primary job is to identify and preempt threats to the regime. Its operatives do so through spying, intimidation, sabotage, false-flag operations and other similar activities. It is largely to the FSB's credit, for instance, that Putin has seen so little public opposition to the war.

If the FSB is Putin's eyes and ears at home, the military is the fist he shakes at Russia's external foes. The job of his top generals is to maintain Russia's military superiority – or the appearance of it – by developing and testing new weapons, even if they only last until the end of the parade route.



Ukrainian servicemen near Bakhmut, Donetsk, where the reported death toll ratio is five Russians to one Ukrainian. Photograph: Marko Đurica/Reuters

The war has put each of these blocs to the test, and both have flunked spectacularly and repeatedly. The most recent military offensive, led by a close confidant of Putin, General Valery Gerasimov, has seemingly choked even before it started, with Russian death toll at Bakhmut – a town of questionable military importance – reported as a staggering five-to-one ratio compared with Ukrainian losses. The FSB has also fallen on its face on more than one occasion, most recently in a foiled plot to destablise the government of Moldova, likely with the goal of using the country's territory or military resources to aid in Russia's war with Ukraine.

These failures notwithstanding, Putin's inner circle retains influence in his decision-making process, and hence is key to any hope of Russia finally taking seat at the negotiating table. However, members of Russia's intelligence and military elite are also impervious to western pressure. True to their anti-west rhetoric, they do not hold vast foreign assets, at least not in their own name. They prefer to live in Moscow rather than abroad, vacation in Yalta rather than in the French Riviera, and cheer for Russian football clubs rather than those in the Premier League.

We have seen that battlefield losses alone will not compel Russia to engage in good-faith negotiations. Forcing Russia to agree to a settlement – and to honour it– is impossible without swaying the members of Putin's inner circle. According to scholars of international conflict, wars end when their costs become unbearable to at least one of the adversaries. Putin and his regime are impervious to the human costs of war. The children and grandchildren of Putin's confidants are not the ones thrown into the meat grinder at Bakhmut – they are safely ensconced in elite boarding schools, luxurious villas and invitation-only country clubs, bought and paid for with their family's ill-gotten gains. Ironically, many of these safe havens are located in western Europe and North America.

And yet, aside from a handful of high-profile seizures of superyachts in the war's early days, the west has done precious little to target the members of Putin's inner circle. To be precise, most of Putin's cronies – and some of their families – eventually made it on to the official sanctions lists at most western countries in the last year. But no wealthy Russian worth their salt would ever put their assets, foreign or domestic, under their own name. Tax evasion and shady accounting has been the lifeblood of the Russian financial system since at least the 90s. Putin himself is suspected to be the world's richest man, but is known to officially declare only a modest apartment in St Petersburg.

Destabilising Putin's symbiotic relationship with his cronies is the only real way to inflict costs on the Russian leader. And while Putin's generals may welcome Russia's growing isolation, they also have long recognised the investment value and money laundering potential of London and Paris real estate. So while they are toiling away in their Moscow offices their girlfriends, wives and children are spending their time in their luxury residences in the so-called decadent west.

The west has balked at taking the simplest steps in enforcing sanctions, such as centralising tracing and information-sharing, forcing banks to reveal account ownership rather than putting the onus of reporting on the account owner, annulling sanctions against family members. Do they really expect that the sanctioned cronies will willingly hand over their assets?

The generals and strongmen may have few obvious and direct ties to the west, but that just means the west has to do a better job of identifying and targeting their fixers, mistresses and children. If a handful of individuals can trace a London apartment to Russia's defence minister, then top forensic accountants can certainly do similar things at scale.

To see any real results, the west must start applying its anti-corruption and money-laundering laws to seize the ill-gotten villas, freeze the offshore accounts and revoke the golden passports. The battlefield losses will take on a different meaning only when coupled with real costs in wealth and lifestyle. This wealth is what bought Putin the loyalty of his inner circle in the first place. And, while some will stand by him, others may reduce their enthusiasm for future offensives or become less helpful plotting coups and false-flag operations. In fact, the continuous string of flops, stunted offensives and foiled plots experienced by "world's second best army" may suggest that some of this may have already been happening.

Military success should be celebrated, but it has not been decisive enough to convince the Russian elite to quit sending other people's children to slaughter. Embarrassing military defeats, coupled with personal financial losses, might.

- Olga Chyzh researches political violence and repressive regimes; she is an assistant professor in the department of political science at the University of Toronto

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2023.03.17 - Around the world

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French protesters and police clash after Macron forces through pension age rise – video

France

Macron uses special powers to force through plan to raise pension age

Chaotic scenes in parliament and Paris streets as thousands gather in spontaneous protest

- Why are pensions such a political flashpoint in France?

Angelique Chrisafis in Paris
@achrisafis
Thu 16 Mar 2023 14.38 EDTFirst published on Thu 16 Mar 2023 11.13 EDT

The French government has used controversial special constitutional powers to force through a rise in the pension age amid chaotic scenes in parliament in which radical left MPs sang La Marseillaise at the top of their voices to stop the prime minister, Élisabeth Borne, from speaking.

The president, Emmanuel Macron, took a last-minute decision to avoid a parliamentary vote and instead push through his unpopular plan to raise the pension age from 62 to 64.

Minutes before MPs in the lower house were to vote, Macron was still holding a series of frantic meetings with senior political figures, and suddenly chose to use special powers instead of risking a vote, which he appeared poised to lose.

He opted to invoke article 49.3 of the constitution, which gives the government power to bypass parliament.

MPs on the left shouted “Resign! Resign!” at Borne, and members of the radical left party France Unbowed sang the national anthem so loudly that Borne could at first not speak and the session had to be suspended before she tried again to be heard.

Borne told parliament the bill would be pushed through because the government could not “gamble the future of our pensions”.

Macron had told cabinet ministers that “the financial risks were too great” if the law had been rejected by MPs, according to reports from inside talks at the Élysée.

Shortly afterwards, thousands of people gathered in a spontaneous protest at Place de la Concorde in the centre of the city, as trade unions promised to intensify the strikes and street demonstrations that have taken place since January. The head of the hardline CGT union, Philippe Martinez, said forcing through the law “shows contempt towards the people”.

Police fired teargas and water cannon and charged in an effort to disperse the crowd on Thursday night, as some protesters threw cobblestones. In several other French cities including Marseille there were also spontaneous protests against the reform.

Police have arrested 120 people in Paris, according to Le Figaro. A police officer was reportedly injured in one standoff with protestors and rioters.

After the rally was dispersed, some protesters created fires and caused damage to shop fronts in side streets, Agence France-Presse reporters said. Several stores were looted during protests in Marseille, in the country’s south, while clashes between protesters and security forces also erupted in the western cities of Nantes and Rennes as well as Lyon in the south-east, they said.

French unions called for another day of strikes and action against the reform on Thursday 23 March.

Politicians on the left called the government’s move a major defeat and a sign of weakness. The government was accused of being brutal and

undemocratic.

French MPs sing Marseillaise and boo as PM forces through pensions overhaul – video

Borne had seemed aware in recent weeks of the uproar and protests that could be prompted by the use of “49.3” special powers, and had appeared reluctant to use them.

Opposition politicians will call for a vote of no confidence in the government in the next 24 hours. Whether this can pass will depend on whether polarised opposition parties would group together. Any no-confidence vote would need the support of the right’s Les Républicains to pass, but the party’s leader, Éric Ciotti, said it would not support such a vote.

Macron made no public comment on Thursday but Agence France-Presse said he told a closed-door cabinet meeting: “You cannot play with the future of the country.”

The political crisis over pensions changes highlights how Macron’s position has been severely undermined in the national assembly after his centrist grouping failed to win an absolute majority in parliamentary elections last June. Without one, it had relied on winning over MPs from the Les Républicains party to support the pensions project, but then decided the numbers were not enough.

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The Communist MP Fabien Roussel called on street protesters and trade unionists to keep mobilising.

Under Macron's pension changes, the minimum general retirement age will increase from 62 to 64, some public sector workers will lose privileges and there will be an accelerated increase in the number of years of work required to qualify for a full pension.

Some politicians from the centrist Modem party, which is allied with Macron's Renaissance group in parliament, said forcing the bill through was a mistake.

Erwan Balanant, a Brittany MoDem MP, said he had left the parliament chamber "in a state of shock". Other centrist MPs said it was a waste and showed weakness.

"It's a total failure for the government," the far-right leader Marine Le Pen told reporters afterwards, adding that Borne should resign.

Polls show that two-thirds of French people oppose the pension changes.

Transport workers, energy workers, dockers, teachers and public sector workers, including museum staff, have held strikes in recent weeks. A continuing rubbish-collection strike and has led to more than 7,000 tonnes of waste building up across half of Paris.

Trade unions say the reform will penalise low-income people in manual jobs who tend to start their careers early, forcing them to work longer than graduates, who are less affected by the changes.

The government has argued that raising the retirement age, scrapping privileges for some public sector workers and toughening criteria for a full pension are needed to prevent big deficits building up.

The change would bring France into line with its European neighbours, most of which have raised the retirement age to 65 or older.

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Emmanuel Macron has previously tried to make changes to the French pensions system. Photograph: Blondet Eliot/Abaca/Rex/Shutterstock

Emmanuel Macron

Explainer

Why are pensions such a political flashpoint in France?

Macron skips vote to force pension changes through, but faces more protests and a possible vote of no confidence

- Macron uses special powers to force through plan

Angelique Chrisafis in Paris
@achrisafis
Thu 16 Mar 2023 13.13 EDTFirst published on Thu 16 Mar 2023 09.03 EDT

Proposed changes to France's pension system, which have provoked huge protests and strikes since the start of the year, were due to be voted on in parliament on Thursday, in a decisive moment for Emmanuel Macron. However, at the last moment he pulled the vote and used special constitutional powers to force the plans through.

What are Macron's proposed pension changes?

The minimum general retirement age will rise from 62 to 64, some public sector workers will lose privileges and there will be an accelerated increase in the number of years of work required to qualify for a full pension. The changes were part of Macron's manifesto for his re-election to a second term in office in 2022.

Hasn't Macron tried to make changes to the pension system before?

Yes. In 2019, during his first term, he put forward a different plan to unify the complex French pension system. He argued that getting rid of the 42 special regimes for sectors ranging from rail and energy workers to lawyers was crucial to keep the system financially viable. At that time, he did not want to raise the retirement age.

Protests against those proposals lasted longer than any strike since the wildcat workers' stoppages of 1968. Macron's changes were eventually shelved at the start of the coronavirus pandemic in 2020.

Who has been protesting on the streets in recent weeks?

In a rare show of unity, all trade unions – including the moderate centre – have led protests since the start of this year, organising some of the biggest demonstrations in decades, which peaked last Tuesday when an estimated 1.28 million people took to the streets.

Transport workers, energy workers, dockers, teachers and public sector workers, including museum staff, have held strikes. A rubbish-collection strike is continuing and has led to more than 7,000 tonnes of waste building up across half of Paris. Trade unions say the overhaul will penalise low-income people in manual jobs who tend to start their careers early, forcing them to work longer than graduates, who are less affected by the changes. Opinion polls show two-thirds of French people oppose the pension changes and support the protest movement.

Why are pensions such a political flashpoint in France?

The pension system is seen as the cornerstone of the country's cherished model of social protection.

Unlike the market-led system of the UK, France has a pension system prized for what politicians call "solidarity between the generations" – whereby the working population pay mandatory payroll charges to fund those in retirement. All French workers get a state pension.

France has the lowest qualifying age for a state pension among the main European economies and spends a significant amount supporting the system. But the active working population pay high payroll charges and see fair pensions as the bedrock of how society should work.

Every French president for the past 40 years has in some way made changes to the retirement laws, usually prompting anger in the polls and demonstrations on the streets.

French MPs sing Marseillaise and boo as PM forces through pensions overhaul – video

Why did Macron choose to use special powers to force through the changes, instead of a parliamentary vote?

The lower house of parliament, the National Assembly, was poised to vote on Thursday afternoon. But Macron took a surprise, last-minute decision to instead use special constitutional powers to force the plans through without a vote, because he was not certain of the support of enough lawmakers.

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Special powers contained in article 49.3 of the constitution allowed government to bypass members of parliament.

The prime minister Élisabeth Borne announced the decision in parliament amid chaotic scenes in which radical left lawmakers sang the Marseillaise at the top of their voices in attempt to stop her from speaking.

The use of special powers illustrates Macron's difficult position in parliament. He was left severely undermined in the National Assembly after his centrist grouping failed to win an absolute majority in parliamentary elections last June amid major gains for the far right and radical left.

Without a majority, the government needed to rely on lawmakers from the rightwing party, Les Républicains, to back the pensions changes. But despite weeks of negotiations, the numbers did not add up.

What happens next?

Politicians on the left have called on trade unions to continue strikes and street protests.

Opposition politicians will put forward a vote of no confidence in the government within the next 24 hours, which will lead to a vote, perhaps as early as Monday. But whether or not this passes depends on how opposition parties, who are radically against one another, might group together. The radical left does not want to join with Marine Le Pen's far right.

Previous votes of no confidence in this government have not passed because they did not garner the absolute majority of 287. Much rests on whether the rightwing party, Les Républicains, would vote for a motion of no confidence. It has not previously done so. The party's leader, Eric Ciotti, said on Thursday that his party would not put its name to a no confidence vote.

If a vote of no confidence did pass, Macron could stand down the cabinet and stage a reshuffle to form a new government. He also has the power to decide to dissolve parliament and call a snap general election, although that is not his most likely choice.

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Paddy Hazelton: ‘Ireland has changed so much. And this debunks the stereotype of the hooligan in the bar.’ Photograph: Ross O'Callaghan

Ireland

‘Paddies are changing the world’: exhibition seeks to debunk Irish stereotypes

New York photography project features 50 boys and men named Paddy of various backgrounds

Rory Carroll Ireland correspondent
@rorycarroll72
Fri 17 Mar 2023 01.00 EDT

The quintessential Irish name is famous often for the wrong reasons. There are Paddy jokes, paddy wagons and “thick Paddies” – the latter a generic insult used against anyone from Ireland.

It seldom matters if an individual's given name is Patrick, Pádraig, Pádraic or Pat – in the eyes of the world and fellow Irish people, that still makes him Paddy and an embodiment of Irishness.

A cultural photography project called Paddy Irishman is now challenging the stereotypes with an exhibition of 50 Paddies of various ages, backgrounds, ethnicities and sexualities.

The installation opened at Pershing Square outside Grand Central Station, New York, this week in the run-up to the city's St Patrick's Day parade on Friday, giving New Yorkers close-up portraits of Paddies who are artists, activists, architects, athletes and astrophysicists.

There is also a sheep shearer, a composer, a film director, an illustrator, a makeup artist, a schoolboy, an entrepreneur and a jockey. The youngest is Paddy Ischenko, a baby born in Dublin to a Ukrainian mother who named him Patrick to thank her adopted country for providing refuge.



Paddy Liam O'Brien, a sheep shearer, on his farm. Photograph: Ross O'Callaghan

"There has always been a stereotype that followed Irish males around the world," said Ross O'Callaghan, a cinematographer who photographed the

participants. “My intention was to put together all these stories and tell a real-life story of Paddies. It tells a wonderful story of Ireland, where we are now as a country and where we are going.”

The exhibition comes less than a week after a Saturday Night Live skit and the Oscars’ host Jimmy Kimmel revived tropes of the Irish as brawlers and drinkers with impenetrable accents.

“I don’t think we should try to censor the stereotype but we should try to challenge it,” said O’Callaghan, who collaborated with creative directors Roisin Keown and Peter Snodden.

The exhibition is the culmination of three years of work and a callout that drew more than 1,000 Paddies across Ireland. The Guardian featured some in a picture gallery last year.



Paddy Bradley, an architect who inspired the exhibition. Photograph: Ross O’Callaghan

The inspiration for the project was Paddy Bradley, 43, an architect who built a shipping container house on his family’s farm in County Derry, which was named the grandest design of all time by the Channel 4 TV show Grand Designs.

“I was never aware there were so many people named Paddy or Patrick from so many different backgrounds,” Bradley said. “I was blown away by the talents.”

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The exhibition subverts enduring cliches of the Irish as raucous drunks, he said. “It is a wee joke but it’s sort of offensive at the same time. When people see this exhibition I think their eyes will open. These Paddies are changing the world.”



Paddy Barnes, an Olympian, at the Holy Family boxing club in Drogheda, Ireland. Photograph: Ross O'Callaghan

Some of the men are famous, such as the golfer Pádraig Harrington, the television personality Patrick Kielty, and a member of the Birmingham Six, Paddy Hill, who served 16 years in jail after being wrongly convicted of an IRA bombing. Some are well known in their fields, such as Paddy Barnes, an Olympic boxer.

Most are not well known, such as Paddy O'Connor, who served time in a Jamaican prison for smuggling cocaine and successfully campaigned for better conditions for inmates and guards.

Paddy O'Donohoe, 49, was Ireland's first professional body piercer and launched the Dublin International Tattoo Convention.

Paddy Hazleton, 32, who was born in Uganda and grew up in County Sligo, is a professional bodhrán player who blends jazz, rock, folk and African influences. "I did this for the craic," he said. "Ireland has changed so much. And this debunks the stereotype of the hooligan in the bar."

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Indigenous children suffer most from illegal miners’ Amazon invasion

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Headlines tuesday 14 march 2023

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Overall, 1,483 unique allegations were reported against 1,539 police officers. Photograph: Nick Potts/PA

Police

More than 1,500 UK police officers accused of violence against women in six months

‘Staggering’ figures from the National Police Chiefs’ Council show that less than 1% of those accused have been sacked

Rachel Hall
@rachela_hall
Mon 13 Mar 2023 20.01 EDTLast modified on Tue 14 Mar 2023 08.55 EDT

More than 1,500 police officers have been accused of violent offences against women and girls over a period of six months, and less than 1% have been sacked, according to new figures.

Overall, 1,483 unique allegations were reported against 1,539 police officers – or 0.7% of the workforce. There were 1,177 cases of alleged police-perpetrated violence, including sexual harassment and assault, reported between October 2021 and April 2022, according to data from the National Police Chiefs' Council (NPCC).

Just over half the cases, 653 (55%), were conduct matters, which are usually raised by a colleague within the force. The remaining cases, 524 (45%), were complaints from the public.

Forced to give up running every year: when will women feel safe in the dark? - video

Almost two-thirds of the complaints from the public were about the use of force, for example handcuffing or arrest, while 9% concerned harassing behaviour, 6% related to assault and 5% abuse of position for a sexual purpose.

For the conduct allegations, 48% concerned discreditable conduct carried outside working hours, while 19% related to sexual assault, 13% to sexual harassment and 6% to abuse of position for a sexual purpose.

Just under half the complaints and nearly three-quarters of the conduct cases still had not been finalised when the data was collected, but where cases had closed, 70% of conduct cases (136) and 91% of complaint cases (290) were thrown out, with just 13 officers and staff sacked for misconduct, and nobody fired as a result of public complaints.

The deputy chief constable Maggie Blyth, the National Police Chiefs' Council coordinator for violence against women and girls, said she wanted to see more officers investigated, disciplined and sacked for crimes and misconduct against women and girls.

She said the figures "reinforce the urgency and importance of our current mission to lift the stones and root abusers and corrupt individuals out of policing. The vast majority of officers and staff are professional and

committed but I know it is shocking to hear about any potential predators in policing and that this can further shake fragile trust."

She added that the data was from a year ago and therefore did not reflect work done over the past 18 months to identify wrongdoing, strengthen misconduct investigations and toughen sanctions. She said she hoped that future iterations would show "the impact of those changes", including giving more women the confidence to report concerns.

Publishing an annual assessment of police performance is a new step taken by the NPCC and College of Policing to improve responses to violence against women and girls, and to tackle rampant sexism and misogyny in the force.

The document notes that the figures in some areas, especially allegations of domestic abuse and inappropriate sexual behaviour, may be higher since many incidents go unreported, and there are some problems with recording processes, but it hopes it will be a tool for measuring progress.

The figures also shed light on the scale of violence against women and girls, which at more than half a million reported crimes represented 16% of all recorded crime from October 2021 and April 2022, with domestic abuse the most prevalent form.

Across the 40 police forces for which data was available, 428,355 cases had a recorded outcome, and a suspect was charged in just 6%. In most cases, there were problems with evidence or victims withdrew from the case.

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Farah Nazeer, the chief executive of Women's Aid, said the statistics revealed "the staggering scale of violence against women and girls" and had "deeply worrying implications for women's already low levels of trust in the criminal justice system".

She called on the government to increase oversight of the criminal justice response to female survivors of violence to hold police forces, crime commissioners, probation and the courts to account and achieve "desperately needed transformation".

The moves are part of efforts to tackle misogyny in policing after scandals including the case of David Carrick, a former police officer who was found to be a prolific sex offender, and the murder of Sarah Everard by a serving officer.

Police leaders have asked the Home Office to strengthen existing regulations, including barring anyone convicted or cautioned for this type of offence from policing and re-vetting anyone accused of these types of crimes. Chief constables are also encouraged to use accelerated misconduct hearings.

A national threat assessment of the scale of violence against women and girls is due to be made next month.

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2023/mar/14/more-than-1500-uk-police-officers-accused-of-violence-against-women-in-six-months

US, UK and Australia embarking on a 'path of error and danger', says China – video

Aukus

China says Aukus submarines deal embarks on ‘path of error and danger’

Beijing accuses US, UK and Australia of disregarding global concerns with plan to build nuclear-powered vessels

Amy Hawkins and Rhoda Kwan
Tue 14 Mar 2023 05.34 EDTLast modified on Tue 14 Mar 2023 12.02 EDT

China has accused the US, UK and Australia of embarking on a “path of error and danger” in response to the Aukus partners’ announcement of a deal on nuclear-powered submarines.

“The latest joint statement from the US, UK and Australia demonstrates that the three countries, for the sake of their own geopolitical interests, completely disregard the concerns of the international communities and are walking further and further down the path of error and danger,” China’s foreign ministry spokesperson Wang Wenbin said during a regular press briefing on Tuesday.

The multibillion-dollar deal, announced during a meeting of Aukus leaders in San Diego on Monday, will provide Australia with nuclear-powered submarines in an effort to counter the rise of China in the Indo-Pacific.

Aukus announce development of nuclear powered submarine 'SSN Aukus' – video

The spokesperson’s comments came after the Chinese mission to the UN tweeted a statement accusing the three countries of fuelling an arms race. It said the deal was a “textbook case of double standard”.

The US president, Joe Biden, rejected the accusation, saying the submarines would be "nuclear-powered, not nuclear-armed". Penny Wong, Australia's foreign minister, said the Chinese criticism was "not grounded in fact".

Biden said he expected to speak with Xi Jinping – who recently secured a third term as China's president – soon but declined to elaborate.

On Tuesday Wang said China did not want to "communicate for the sake of communicating" but that "the US side should come forward sincerely, with practical actions to promote China-US relations".

Relations between China and the US are at their lowest in decades. Various channels of communication, including military dialogues, have been paused since Nancy Pelosi, then the speaker of the US House of Representatives, visited Taiwan in August, angering China.



Wang Wenbin said the US 'should come forward sincerely, with practical actions to promote China-US relations'. Photograph: Liu Zheng/AP

In February the US shot down a suspected Chinese spy balloon that floated into US airspace. China said it was a meteorological monitoring device that had blown off course, but the US rejected that claim and cancelled a long-awaited trip by Antony Blinken, the US secretary of state, to Beijing.

The US and its allies are increasingly worried about the prospect of China launching a conflict with Taiwan, which would be catastrophic for the self-governing island's 23 million people and would spill over into the rest of the region. Observers are watching closely for signs that China's military is preparing for such an attack. On Monday Xi closed China's annual parliamentary session with a speech in which he promised to build China's armed forces into a "great wall of steel".

On Tuesday, Taiwan's foreign ministry said it "welcomes the continued advancement of the Aukus partnership", noting that Taiwan is "at the forefront of the fight against authoritarian expansion".

Biden has promised to respond militarily if China invades Taiwan, but of the allies Australia would be the first to feel the impact of a conflict in the Indo-Pacific. Anthony Albanese, Australia's prime minister, said the Aukus deal, which is forecast to cost $268bn (£220bn) to $368bn, was the "biggest single investment in Australia's defence capability in all of its history". Analysts quoted in Chinese state media said it was an "expensive mistake".

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Aukus announce development of nuclear powered submarine 'SSN Aukus' – video

Aukus

Aukus nuclear submarine deal loophole prompts proliferation fears

Scheme allowing nuclear materials in Australian submarines worries experts about precedent of safeguard removal

Julian Borger in Washington
Tue 14 Mar 2023 06.22 EDTFirst published on Mon 13 Mar 2023 18.01 EDT

The Aukus scheme announced on Monday in San Diego represents the first time a loophole in the 1968 Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) has been used to transfer fissile material and nuclear technology from a nuclear weapons state to a non-weapons state.

The loophole is paragraph 14, and it allows fissile material utilised for non-explosive military use, like naval propulsion, to be exempt from inspections and monitoring by the UN nuclear watchdog, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). It makes arms controls experts nervous because it sets a precedent that could be used by others to hide highly enriched uranium, or plutonium, the core of a nuclear weapon, from international oversight.

On Tuesday, the Chinese mission to the UN accused the US and UK of “clearly violating the object and purpose of the NPT”, adding that “such a textbook case of double standard will damage the authority and effectiveness of the international non-proliferation system”.

“The nuclear submarine cooperation plan released today by Aukus is a blatant act that constitutes serious nuclear proliferation risks, undermines

international non-proliferation system, fuels arms races, and hurts peace and stability in the region," the mission said.

The IAEA said in a statement on Tuesday that Australia, the US and UK had informed it of the deal, but reiterated that the "legal obligations" of the three countries to non-proliferation were "paramount".

"Ultimately, the [IAEA] must ensure that no proliferation risks will emanate from this project," it said.

The Japanese prime minister, Fumio Kishida, supports the steps taken by Aukus, Kyodo News reported. The government said the nuclear-powered submarine procurement plan was explained to Kishida in a phone call with the Australian prime minister, Anthony Albanese, on Tuesday.

The Aukus partners have held intensive discussions with the IAEA about the plans and taken steps to limit the risk. Early on in the talks, the idea was floated that paragraph 14 might not be invoked at all, and the nuclear fuel would be kept under IAEA safeguards. However, the IAEA was not prepared to have its inspection standards watered down to the extent that the agency would not be able to determine the timing of a visit, and the Aukus partners were squeamish about letting an international team of inspectors onboard their state-of-the-art submarines.

To mitigate the proliferation risk, the Australians have agreed not to have a training reactor on their territory, but to train their submariners in the US and UK instead. Australia will not enrich or reprocess the spent nuclear fuel, and the fissile material provided by the US and UK will come in welded units that do not have to be refuelled in their lifetime. Australia has undertaken not to acquire the equipment necessary to chemically reprocess spent fuel that would make it usable in a weapon.

"Since day one of this effort, or consultation period, we have prioritised non-proliferation," a senior US official said.

Rishi Sunak announces £5bn for defence as UK faces 'volatile' world – video

The IAEA director general, Rafael Mariano Grossi, has said he believes the Aukus partners “are committed to ensuring the highest non-proliferation and safeguards standards are met”, and noted his “satisfaction with the engagement and transparency shown by the three countries thus far”.

“I do think the three countries are quite serious about trying to mitigate the harm to the non-proliferation regime. I think they’ve done a very good job engaging with the IAEA,” James Acton, co-director of the nuclear policy programme at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, said. “But I still think there is real and concrete harm done.

“The primary problem with Aukus was always the precedent set, that Australia would be the first country that would remove nuclear fuel from safeguards for use in naval reactors,” Acton added. “My fear was never that Australia would misuse that fuel, but that other countries would invoke Aukus as a precedent for removing nuclear fuel from safeguards.”

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The security minister, Tom Tugendhat. Photograph: Tejas Sandhu/Sopa Images/Rex/Shutterstock

Immigration and asylum

Tom Tugendhat defends asylum bill but dodges questions on lack of legal routes

Security minister denies only route for women's rights activist from Iran is via a boat across the Channel

Jessica Elgot Deputy political editor
@jessicaelgot
Tue 14 Mar 2023 05.00 EDTLast modified on Tue 14 Mar 2023 05.44 EDT

The security minister, Tom Tugendhat, has defended the government's illegal migration bill, swerving repeated questions on whether there were any safe and legal routes for refugees from countries such as Iran to come to the UK.

The bill, which will mean asylum seekers who come to the UK via “illegal” routes being deported, has come in for harsh criticism from the former prime minister Theresa May and others, but Tugendhat said the government was determined to end the suffering caused by traffickers.

“This isn’t just about the crossing of the English Channel. This is about the thousands of people who are dying in the Sahara, who are dying in the Mediterranean, who are being trafficked by some of the most appalling people in the world, who have been exploited and turned into, frankly, cargo and commodity when they are just vulnerable people,” he said.

“And we need to focus on the fact that this trade is utterly horrific, and must end and this government is absolutely committed to doing what it can to end it.”

Tugendhat, the former chair of the foreign affairs select committee, avoided questions on what safe and legal routes were available to people wishing to seek asylum in the UK from countries such as Iran.

He said there were UN bodies operating in countries such as Turkey and Lebanon, which had “often supported that safe and legal route in different ways” but denied that the only route for a women’s rights activist from Tehran was via a boat across the Channel.

“Some are coming to rejoin their families on family visas and then claim asylum when they’re here. So it’s not simply by boats,” he said.

Small boats bill is 'shutting the door to victims of modern slavery', says Theresa May – video

In a damning intervention during a parliamentary debate on Monday, May criticised the home secretary, Suella Braverman’s plan, warning that “anybody who thinks that this bill will deal with the issue of illegal migration once and for all is wrong”.

The bill says refugees who arrive in the UK without prior permission will be detained for 28 days and that asylum claims will be deemed “inadmissible” whatever the individual’s circumstances.

They will be removed either to their own country or a “safe third country”, such as Rwanda, if that is not possible.

May, who introduced the Modern Slavery Act in 2015 when home secretary, said the Home Office “knows genuine victims of modern slavery would be denied support” under the bill. “As it currently stands, we are shutting the door to victims who are being trafficked into slavery [in] the UK,” she said.

May said the bill would not stop illegal migration. “Whenever you close a route for migrants … the migrants and the people smugglers find another way.

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“Anybody who thinks that this bill will deal with the issue of illegal migration once and for all is wrong,” she said.

A number of Tory MPs abstained on the bill and others suggested they would have reservations in future – particular over a possible breach of international law and new provisions for the detention of children.

The former justice secretary Robert Buckland said he had been prepared to vote for the bill at second reading but that he had reservations about letting it progress further. He told BBC Radio 4’s Today programme: “I said that the

issue relating to particularly women and children needs to be directly addressed.

“I do not support the detention of unaccompanied children or indeed the splitting up of families; that was a government policy that has been followed since 2010.

“And I think that those parts of the bill should be removed. Voting to allow the principle of a bill to go forwards is different from the detail of the bill and I would expect it to be scrutinised carefully.”

He added: “I’ve made it very clear that I do not support the detention of children or indeed women in those circumstances and that I think that the government risks looking as if it is guilty of ineffective authoritarianism, that’s something I do not support, and I made it very clear in the house last night.”

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2023.03.14 - Spotlight

- **Harry's styles! My week attempting to dress like the world's most fashionable man**
- **The disabled villain Why sensitivity reading can't kill off this ugly trope**
- **'I did standup with my baby strapped to me' The comics motherhood can't stop**
- **Analysis Hunt's budget aims to push people back to work just as the jobs market weakens**

Harry’s styles! My week attempting to dress like the world’s most fashionable man

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The disabled villain: why sensitivity reading can’t kill off this ugly trope

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‘I was told women’s experiences are niche’ … Josie Long. Photograph: Giles Smith

Comedy

‘I did standup with my baby strapped to me’ – the comics motherhood can’t stop

Some lied. Some hid it. And a few even mined it for jokes. Becoming a mum used to be near-fatal to a comedian's career. But now, in a Mother's Day special, we meet the new wave taking on taboos



Rachael Healy
Tue 14 Mar 2023 02.00 EDTLast modified on Tue 14 Mar 2023 12.46 EDT

'Before I had kids, I swam in an ocean of time," says Josie Long, who has been doing standup since she was a teenager. "I did a lot of touring and was away for long periods. If I wanted, I could write all night. I slept in all the time." Now she has two children and has just about managed to carve out three days a week for work.

The comedian's recent shows have featured material about motherhood, including a beautiful account of the birth of her first daughter. "When I started in comedy," she says, "I was on the sharp end of a lot of sexist stuff. I was told over and over that women's bodies are disgusting and women's experiences are niche. So it was wonderfully liberating to do a story about childbirth."

> It used to be 50:50 whether a woman in comedy went public about her pregnancy. I saw my elders hide it and panic

Finding out you were pregnant was once a mixed blessing for a comedian. Sexism within the industry left some feeling compelled to hide it, get back on stage as soon as possible, and avoid making jokes about motherhood. Jessica Fostekew, who has a seven-year-old son, recalls what things were like when she was pregnant: “It was 50:50 whether a woman in comedy went public about her pregnancy. I watched my elders hide theirs and panic. Then I watched a few brave women smash through that.”

The podcast Funny Mummies gives comedians a space to discuss these issues. It is hosted by Hatty Ashdown, a comic, and Gemma Beagley, a former standup who now works behind the scenes.

“It’s about mums in comedy being open and honest, not feeling like you’ve got to lie or hide that you’ve had kids,” says Ashdown, a mother of two. “I wanted to find out how comedian mums juggle it all.” She believes gigging is not a level playing field, as it is assumed that female comedians are responsible for the childcare. “Male comics are booked over female comics,” she says. “We need more dads saying, ‘I’ve got to sort out a babysitter.’”

When Long became pregnant, she thought: “I don’t feel secure enough in my position in the industry to be having a child. No matter how established you are, nothing is a guarantee. People don’t treat you like they would treat someone in a conventional job. They’d consider you taking nine months off as extreme and unnecessary.”

Long found herself writing material just days after giving birth. Fostekew, meanwhile, felt a “dogged determination” to carry on working as much as ever and now questions her “panic” decision to resume standup after five weeks. “I felt like the relationships with people booking me were so fragile. That was, in hindsight, madness.”


‘Don’t feel bad about getting childcare’ … Hatty Ashdown. Photograph: Karla Gowlett

When Fostekew’s son turned one, she had a mini existential crisis. Spending her nights travelling to play comedy clubs and finding last-minute babysitters no longer felt sustainable. She decided to develop standup shows “that are nourishing and rewarding” and to write more for TV and radio. Over a couple of years, she scaled back appearances at club shows and created her award-nominated hour Hench.

Long had a similar refocus: “When I’m on stage, I don’t have any time for bullshit. I have to enjoy it. It’s always felt like my playtime, but now even more so.”

Standup Athena Kugblenu has two children. During her first pregnancy she quickly became “quite strategic” about her career. “At the time I was expecting, I had a few radio credits. You don’t have to leave the house to write, so I made a deliberate decision to do more scripted stuff.” However, the cost of childcare remains “a massive barrier”, Kugblenu says. “A lot of freelancers are struggling.”

Ashdown recently took a second job to help cover costs. On her podcast, she found it refreshing when Holly Walsh, co-creator of BBC series Motherland,

was open about hiring a nanny to facilitate her TV work. “Don’t feel bad about getting childcare for the night, because everyone else is getting childcare during the day,” Ashdown says.

> I was crying and my breasts were streaming milk. I thought: What am I doing?

“It’s about saying yes to help,” says Fostekew. “I’ve had to get to the point where I’m crying because a job I want has come in and I need one more babysitter.” During her son’s first year, she often took him on the road. This mostly worked, but one experience on a TV advert sticks with her. Her boy was breastfeeding, so had to come to the set. Filming overran and she wasn’t given breastfeeding breaks: “I ended up being there for 16 hours. In one scene, they were filming the back of my head, and I was crying as my tits were streaming milk – because I could hear him crying. I was like, ‘What am I doing?’”

Long also took her children to work. “With my second baby, I did shows with her strapped to me. On the one hand, I love being able to do that. On the other, it’s because we don’t have a support network near us.” Long and her partner, fellow comedian Jonny Donahoe, share parenting equally. She feels lucky to work with “people I know and love”: her producers looked after her baby in Edinburgh while she and Donahoe performed overlapping shows. Both Long and Fostekew have found ways to tour, too, travelling for shorter periods rather than being on the road for weeks.



‘It’s about saying yes to help’ … Jessica Fostekew. Photograph: Murdo MacLeod/The Guardian

Parenting can be ridiculous and hilarious, a constant source of new jokes. But there are hazards. “Being a woman in comedy means there’s always an expectation that you’ll just talk about woman-specific things,” says Kugblenu. “I don’t think that’s unique to being a mother.” While many men talk about being dads in their standup, they are rarely accused of being one-note. “The amount of men who go on stage like, ‘I’ve got a one-week-old at home!’ Double standards go hand-in-hand with comedy.”

Some of Ashdown’s podcast guests say it was motherhood that actually moved them to start doing standup. Ashdown wrote parenting material while hosting a comedy show for parents and babies, but evening gigs were different: “I’ve had people not book me because they think I’m just going to do parent stuff. My opinion is: a good joke is a good joke.” She has also grappled with the responsible way to talk about her children on stage. One son recently received a diagnosis of autism and ADHD: “I think I can talk about it, but I’ve got to find a way of respecting him.”

Fostekew’s comedy draws on her own life – she has told her birth story and joked about accidentally sexist stuff that her son has said. “I have half an eye on his privacy,” she says. “He can’t consent to these stories. He was fair

game until he was about four – most people should be able to laugh at what an absolute weapon they were up until that point. Anything I've written about him in the last year, my parenting is the butt of the joke. That was a conscious change."



'My kids are in a glass box for emergencies only' … Athena Kugblenu. Photograph: Anselm Ebulue

Kugblenu keeps her children's names private and rarely mentions them on stage. She finds more material in news and politics, but points out: "In 10 years' time, we're going to have to show our comedy back to our kids. There are a couple of things that have snuck through, but I'm always seeking to decentre them. That's quite deliberate. They're just so precious. One day I might have to mine them, but at the moment they're in a glass box in case of emergency."

Long also decided she would never use her children's names, dubbing them Mrs Baby and Doctor Baby instead. "I love including little bits and bobs but I'm really aware of their privacy, and wanting them to look at it fondly if they ever see it." Yet her children have hugely influenced the tone of her comedy. "I set an intention to focus more on joyfulness," she says. "I've got to find love for this world and really believe it. This is so twee, but they

teach you to fall in love with the world. They remind you to see the world with joy and wonder.”

All four feel it’s easier than ever to talk about motherhood without judgment. As Ashdown launches series three of Funny Mummies, she hopes it will continue to be a forum for honest conversation: “It still happens now where you’re the only woman on the lineup, let alone the only one talking about having kids. It’s really important that we lift each other.”

Kugblenu recently started her own parenting podcast, Why Does My Child Hate Me?, with activist Layla Lawson. They’ve already discussed discipline, potty training and bodily autonomy. “Being a parent is a position of privilege. But that doesn’t mean the process is a bed of roses. It’s important to be honest about that.” This openness, says Long, is a sign of progress. “I love the fact that we’ve broken this taboo. You feel seen when you share experiences together. It’s thrilling.”

- Josie Long is on tour until 28 September. Funny Mummies and Why Does My Child Hate Me? are available now. Hench is on Prime Video.

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Commuters make their way to work in London. The UK labour force is almost half a million smaller than it was before the Covid crisis. Photograph: Andy Rain/EPA

UK unemployment and employment statistics

Analysis

Hunt’s budget aims to push people back to work just as the jobs market weakens

Larry Elliott Economics editor

Chancellor is trying to to increase employment, but redundancies are up and wage growth has slowed

- **UK pay growth slowdown adds to inflation squeeze on households**

Tue 14 Mar 2023 05.31 EDTLast modified on Wed 15 Mar 2023 09.19 EDT

The last set of labour market figures before the budget provides a stark illustration of the challenges facing Jeremy Hunt, though they are different

from those usually associated with a stagnant economy.

There was a time when the absence of growth for an entire year would have led to sharply rising unemployment. During the recessions of the early 1980s and 90s the jobless total was more than 3 million while the jobless rate rose to more than 10% – three times its current level of 3.7%. Increasing labour supply was not a priority for the Thatcher and Major governments of the time.

Hunt, however, is grappling with problems that would normally be associated with a booming economy rather than a struggling one. Employment is rising, job vacancies are high and nominal pay growth is strong.

As a result, the budget will include measures designed to increase employment, on the grounds that the labour force is still almost half a million smaller than it was before the Covid pandemic and there are plenty of people who would work given the chance.

Tony Wilson, the director of the Institute for Employment Studies thinktank, says in addition to the 1.3 million officially classified as unemployed there are 1.7 million who would take a job but need help to get one. However, he has severe doubts about whether the expected budget measures are the right ones.

“The government has suggested that we will see new investment tomorrow in employment support for those out of work due to long-term ill health, but those who don’t take part could see their benefits reduce,” Wilson says. “This is being described as a ‘nudge’ but it’s more of a shove, and would be destined to fail.”

Labour supply is likely to increase regardless of the budget because the jobs market is on the turn. Redundancies notified to the Insolvency Service are up on a year ago, job vacancies are falling, more people are looking for work and earnings growth has slowed.

Private sector earnings, in particular, are showing clear signs of weakness. Closely watched by the Bank of England, they grew at an annualised rate of 3.5% in the three months to January and with inflation at more than 10%, real wages are falling fast, prompting a warning from the TUC general secretary, Paul Nowak, that “working people can’t take much more of this”.

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In the short term, the squeeze on living standards goes on. It is likely to continue until inflation – still at 10.1% – starts to fall significantly this year.

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2023.03.14 - Opinion

- **The Tories could raise billions in this budget and not spook the markets – but they haven't got the guts**
- **Instead of killing HS2 bit by bit, ministers should just put it out of its misery**
- **The Gary Lineker row isn't about impartiality – it's just the latest attempt to discredit leftish decency**
- **Outrageous slurs have been made about Suella: some of her MPs said she's competent**



‘Our multimillionaire chancellor and a prime minister richer than the king will unveil their budget on Wednesday.’ Rishi Sunak and Jeremy Hunt at No 10 Downing Street. Photograph: Simon Dawson/No10 Downing Street

OpinionBudget 2023

The Tories could raise billions in this budget and not spook the markets – but they haven’t got the guts

Polly Toynbee



Rational reforms of our wildly unjust tax system could harvest huge sums. But don’t expect Jeremy Hunt to listen to the experts

Tue 14 Mar 2023 02.00 EDTLast modified on Tue 14 Mar 2023 10.48 EDT

Was it that Mayfair launch of bottles of Bollinger at £350 a pop? Was it flicking through glossy newspaper supplements with their pages of hideous watches costing hundreds of thousands? No, surely last week’s top shocker was watching both Shell and BP CEOs’ pay double to about £10m each, profiting from the slaughter in Ukraine.

These budget-week reflections, amid a wave of overdue strikes, echo a recent report by the FT’s astute data-cruncher John Burn-Murdoch, that “Britain and the US are poor societies with some very rich people.” The tyranny of averages hides the way we live now, though any reader of this paper, or indeed the FT, will have a weary sense of deja vu about our grotesque and economically dysfunctional inequality: earnings for the top 1% have accelerated since the start of the pandemic. UK plutocrats rank proudly fifth in the world for mega-wealth, but our poor have 20% less than the poor of Slovenia.

That's the context to think about when our multimillionaire chancellor and a prime minister richer than the king unveil their budget on Wednesday. Expect a spot of epoxy to fix a few of their most politically damaging social breakages. But don't accept "there's no more money" when rational reforms of our grotesquely unjust tax system could harvest considerable sums to salve the most egregious social crises.

Britain has got a lot poorer, partly due to economic own goals such as Brexit. There is less of everything following "the most dramatic period of spending cuts in modern history", so taxes must rise unless voters are ready to see public services disintegrate further. That's the choice – and the sharp message from Paul Johnson, Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS) director, in his new book, Follow the Money. He has killer facts: no politician dare challenge IFS figures. His analysis of our warped tax system, riddled with reliefs for rich people and penalties for the rest, offers irrefutably fairer options. "Government's dirty secret is that it chooses not to do the right thing," he writes. That's through fear of voters (he has the advantage of not needing to woo them or confront the Daily Mail). Vastly more money could be raised by squeezing rich people and ending their tax reliefs – but he warns that truly economy-changing sums to invest in long-term growth and public services mean asking everyone to pay more. However, read this eye-opener to see the cornucopia of low-hanging fruit a chancellor could gather.

How much more should we pay in tax? That's up to us, because "there is nothing in economics that says we can't have a bigger state", Johnson writes. Look how similar countries that raise far more tax to buy far better services, while investing in growth, succeed better than us: France, Germany, Sweden and the Netherlands all raise and spend far more, pulling away from us at a faster pace as we sink down the G7 in growth. Incomes in France grew in a decade by 34% and in Germany by 27%, while typical UK income dropped by 2%, reports the Resolution Foundation.

In no particular order, look at our erratic tax system. Take council tax, now almost as outrageous as the poll tax it replaced: with its cap on top rates it defies every rule of tax justice, so zillionaire mansions pay just three times more than the humblest bedsit – sorry, "studio flat". Land value tax, backed by the FT's Martin Wolf, would be fair, while capturing developers' profits to spend on public projects.

It's lucky few people understand pensions: the state gifts earners in the 40% bracket a much more generous amount for every £1 they save than it does those in the 20% bracket. Why not a 25% flat rate for all, says Ros Altmann, former Tory pensions minister? Expect Hunt on Wednesday to further boost top-rate pension tax relief, to keep high earners from retiring.

Don't expect him to make pensioners pay national insurance, even though they are less likely to be poor than the rest. Logically, the meaningless NI should merge with income tax, but if the optics of the headline rate look too frightening, at least Hunt could charge NI on all unearned income received by rentiers and shareholders. No harm would be done to the economy, Johnson says, by raising the basic rate income tax to 25%, the higher rate to 45% and the top rate to 50%: that would bring in a useful £50bn.

Proof that the government never meant to level up is in their capital gains tax, levied at a mere 28% for higher earners, and only 10% for others, rather than being equalised with hard-earned PAYE rates: ending this avoidance by private equity chizzlers would bring in billions. Labour is committed to this, and to closing many tax loopholes.

Here's a counterintuitive idea: VAT exemptions aid rich people more than poor people, as they spend more. Abolishing all zero and reduced-rate VAT, such as on food, energy and children's clothes, would raise so many tens of billions, says Johnson, that you could greatly raise all benefits levels to cover the cost to poor people and compensate other lower-earners several times over.

Why didn't Hunt immediately restore the much-needed health and social care levy, abolished by Liz Truss? Nor did he bring back the cap on bankers' bonuses; their pay will soar thanks to high interest rates pouring cash into their vaults from mortgage payers. Tax-free Isas benefit well-off people: make sure that the £70bn that could be raised is invested in green government bonds, says tax expert Richard Murphy.Rich people love the largely mythical Laffer curve, which pretends that high top-tax ends up yielding less revenue, but Prof Danny Blanchflower skewers it: Donald Trump's "$2tn tax cuts for the rich left $2tn of debt".

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Tax deters harmful things such as tobacco, but on carbon this government does the reverse: it listens to lobbyists, meaning the decade-long petrol tax freeze will continue, costing £6bn. New ultra-low air passenger tax next month cuts the price of domestic flights just when we need people back on trains: flying is taxed less than driving.

All of these are random examples, but there are many other ways to ensure taxes fall on the broadest shoulders while generating more to pay public staff decently, rescue public services, ensure livable benefits rates, invest in green growth and more. That's without considering more radical ideas, such as the LSE's Wealth Tax Commission, which proposes a one-off tax of 5% on wealth above £2m, yielding £80bn.

Truss may act as a warning against spooking the markets, but these reforms would be no-brainers if only the public knew what could be done. A wise thought from Paul Johnson: “Government needs to be brave and so do we.”

- Polly Toynbee is a Guardian columnist

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‘To its backers, HS2 has become like Brexit, the mistake that dare not speak its name.’ Construction of an HS2 tunnel as it leaves London through the Colne Valley. Photograph: David Levene/The Guardian

OpinionHS2

Instead of killing HS2 bit by bit, ministers should just put it out of its misery

Simon Jenkins



The latest delays to this colossal folly offer a golden opportunity to cry halt – and use railway money where it's really needed

Tue 14 Mar 2023 04.00 EDTLast modified on Tue 14 Mar 2023 11.35 EDT

It is death by gangrene. No government seems to have the guts to kill HS2, Britain's biggest and craziest infrastructure project, so each merely lops off another limb. In 2021, it was Leeds. Now the opening of the Birmingham-to-Manchester and Acton-to-Euston lines has been delayed.

This railway is a southern project on which the chancellor, Jeremy Hunt, is blowing a staggering £100m a week or £5bn a year. He is paying HS2's boss £622,000 a year, and its executives in the region of £250,000. After six hopeless chairs, Whitehall last month desperately turned to a civil servant, Sir Jonathan Thompson, to take charge.

Even on present guesstimates, the core HS2 will not reach Birmingham until the mid-2030s. As for the bizarre decision to head for Euston, that cannot be realised until about 2040. By then, the citizens of Camden, who have already lost hundreds of homes to this railway, will have overlooked a wilderness on their doorstep for 20 years or more. The world's finest contractors will have

taken a quarter century to build a project that Robert Stephenson finished in five years with picks and shovels. This is inexcusable.

The inertia of the rest of Whitehall on the issue is baffling. The Department for Transport has been under mounting pressure to find cost savings from HS2 – or let other, non-HS2 rail investment projects lapse. The National Audit Office whimpers occasionally, when it should have wielded the axe long ago. To its backers, HS2 has become like Brexit, the mistake that dare not speak its name.

Railways are going through an agonising period as Britons reassess how they wish to work and travel. Local commuting remains significantly down on pre-Covid levels. Long-distance services are down by over a half, even before the current strikes. These figures destroy even the wildest value-for-money case for what is a duplicate luxury line from Birmingham to London.

On the other hand, they do offer ministers a golden opportunity to cry halt and review rail investment as a whole. Under pressure from the levelling up secretary, Michael Gove, Hunt will this week announce a "devolution revolution" in his budget. This will delegate to regional mayors choice of infrastructure priorities, notably in transport. It should be for them to decide what railways their part of the country wants to see.

Local services in south Lancashire and West Yorkshire are now dreadful, and will stay that way as long as HS2 consumes transport's capital budget. Hunt still has around £50-60bn to spend on HS2, so why not offer it to the northern regions, which this project was supposed to benefit, but will do so no longer? Let them decide what do with it. He could then sell his Camden wasteland for development – or for a memorial park to Robert Stephenson. This year is the 50th anniversary of the unravelling of Whitehall's last great transport fixation, London's Motorway Box. The death of HS2 would be a suitable commemoration.

- Simon Jenkins is a Guardian columnist

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Man City fans demonstrate their support on Saturday. Photograph: Zac Goodwin/PA

OpinionGary Lineker

The Gary Lineker row isn’t about impartiality – it’s just the latest attempt to discredit leftish decency

Zoe Williams



I’ve been in the Lineker defence business for ages. As usual, what his critics are singling out is not what they really hate

Tue 14 Mar 2023 03.00 EDTLast modified on Tue 14 Mar 2023 16.03 EDT

I’ve been in the Gary Lineker defence business for ages, since way before it was cool. In 2017, the Daily Mail attempted a hit job on his tax affairs – one of the laziest drive-bys in tabloid history, nothing but innuendo and guesswork. Arguably, it would have been better to ignore it, as there was nothing really to see. Besides, he’s no wallflower, Lineker, and hardly lacked a platform of his own. But it seemed important because the rightwing press was using confected disapproval as a deterrent; they didn’t really care whether he paid tax or not. They don’t even like tax. They just wanted to discredit his progressive credentials, to quell the leftish things he said, which were then, as now, mostly related to the treatment of refugees. If, in the process, they could corrode the unity of the wokerati, buttress the proposition that you have to be poor to be on the left (and you’ll never be quite poor enough) and make any other public figure think twice before skating anywhere near a humane point of view, all the better. I never thought Lineker’s reputation was under any threat, but I chimed in anyway, like a kazoo watching an orchestra and deciding it needed a bit of extra help.

This current row is not about any of the things it purports to be about: it's not about the BBC's rules on impartiality, which are wildly incoherent and, even if they made internal sense, wouldn't apply to Gary Lineker anyway. It's not about what you are and aren't allowed to compare to 1930s Germany, and who is qualified to police those comparisons.

The question is more fundamental: when politics marches resolutely rightwards, at some point the concept of impartiality in the wider culture – a nice bevy of voices from other spheres, watching what they say because politics is not really their business – becomes meaningless. That's what this debate is really about: are we at the point when silence is complicity, or do we have to wait till the policies are worse, till the language is more poisonous, till we've been fully ejected from the international community, before we can say that for certain? That's what Lineker's critics are really exercised about – not that he's failed to be impartial, but that he's exposed impartiality as the highest value for a different era.

- Zoe Williams is a Guardian columnist

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‘The British people aren’t xenophobic,’ the home secretary said. Though she was very much hoping she could persuade them to be. Photograph: Uk Parliament/Andy Bailey/Reuters

The politics sketchPolitics

Outrageous slurs have been made about Suella: some of her MPs said she’s competent

John Crace



Sunak sloped off to San Diego for the illegal migration bill's second reading – so it was down to his cabinet to waste parliament's time

Mon 13 Mar 2023 16.33 EDTLast modified on Mon 13 Mar 2023 18.47 EDT

You'd have thought the Tories would have wanted to give their illegal migration bill – insert your own gags – a good send-off for its second reading. But Rishi Sunak chose to be 8,000 miles away in San Diego. Far away from the scene of the crime. And the government also insisted on two ministerial statements – one of them hardly pressing – to delay the debate until late in the day. Almost as if they wanted it over and done with. As it was the government benches were half empty. Most of the saner Tories had decided to give it a swerve. Not brave enough to speak out in the chamber.

The debate started with a point of order from Labour's Clive Lewis. The bill came with its own health warning that there was a less that 50/50 chance of the government surviving a legal challenge. So why waste parliament's time? Surely it would be better to let the courts battle this one out first. Suella Braverman disagreed. Labour hadn't understood. This wasn't how it worked. What was going to happen was that the UK was going to kick

asylum seekers out regardless of international law. A cunning plan to turn us into a rogue state.

“The British people aren’t xenophobic,” the home secretary said. Though she was very much hoping she could persuade them to be.

We’ve been accused of inflammatory rhetoric, added Braverman. Er yes … guilty as charged. By now the home secretary was looking surprised. Bewildered, even.

Now Suella became lachrymose. Some people had made outrageous slurs about her. Indeed they had. Some of her own MPs had said she was a competent, humane home secretary.

Tory Richard Graham tried to defend her only to precipitate a pile on from the SNP. Theresa May was the only quizzical voice on the Conservative benches. How did Suella square deporting everyone regardless with our duty to screen refugees properly before sending them to Rwanda? Suella merely shrugged. It was full-on delusional. And the people aren’t as nasty as her. The Tories are still 20 points behind in the polls.

Earlier on, the foreign secretary made a statement on the integrated review refresh. Or rather, he merely repeated everything that had been briefed earlier. Only at much greater length. James Cleverly is not a man to use one word where several will do. His real tragedy is that he has no sense of his limitations. He thinks he is a player. A mover and a shaker. Tory MPs merely look on in embarrassment.

Cleverly began as he finished. With waffle. Two years on from the last integrated review, he just wanted to clarify a few things. No one could have predicted that Russia would invade Ukraine. Er … It had literally done just that in 2014 and no one had really batted an eyelid. But no matter.

Then Cleverly moved on to the details. Such as they were. We would be increasing the defence budget by £5bn. Though as £3bn was already promised to the nuclear programme and £1.9bn to replacing our diminishing

weapons stockpile, that would leave the armed forces fighting over the remaining £100m.

Labour had no real issues with any of this – David Lammy, the shadow foreign secretary, may not be so incoherent as Cleverly but he also loves the sound of his own voice and so he took an age to say next to nothing. The deputy speaker was even desperately trying to get him to shut up.

Most of the criticism came from the Tory ranks. Some were upset China had not been named as more of a military threat to the UK. The language had been beefed up a little, they argued, but not enough. We were just asking for trouble by not taking China seriously.

Tobias Ellwood, the chair of the select defence committee, won't be happy until the UK spends every penny it has on defence. Cleverly merely observed that Ben Wallace had had plenty of time to moan about his budget during the defence questions that had taken place earlier. And because he'd said nothing then he must be happy. Besides which, the government was definitely going to increase military spending to 2.5% of GDP by 2025. There again, he was also under the impression that the Tories would still be in power then. Maybe he knows something we don't. Actually, scrub that ...

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2023.03.14 - Around the world

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Donald Trump speaks about education policy at the Adler Theatre in Davenport, Iowa, on Monday. Photograph: Kamil Krzaczyński/AFP/Getty Images

US Capitol attack

‘You can blame him’: Trump shifts responsibility for January 6 on Pence

Ex-president’s remarks come after his former vice-president said that history will hold Trump accountable for the violence

Martin Pengelly in New York
@MartinPengelly
Mon 13 Mar 2023 19.45 EDTLast modified on Tue 14 Mar 2023 07.54 EDT

Donald Trump on Monday responded to Mike Pence’s contention that history will hold him accountable for the January 6 attack on Congress, saying the deadly attack was his former vice-president’s fault.

“Had he sent the votes back to the legislatures, they wouldn’t have had a problem with January 6, so in many ways you can blame him for January 6,” Trump told reporters on a flight to Iowa for a campaign appearance.

He was referring to his attempt to have Pence, in his role as Senate president, refuse to certify election results in battleground states, on grounds of supposed electoral fraud, thereby overturning Trump’s conclusive defeat by Joe Biden.

Trump added: “Had he sent them back to Pennsylvania, Georgia, Arizona … I believe, number one, you would have had a different outcome. But I also believe you wouldn’t have had ‘January 6’ as we call it.”

Nine deaths have been linked to the attack on Congress, including law enforcement suicides. The riot happened after Trump told supporters to “fight like hell”. More than a thousand rioters have been arrested, hundreds charged and many convicted, some with seditious conspiracy. Others remain wanted.

Trump was impeached for inciting an insurrection but acquitted when enough Senate Republicans remained loyal. Last year, the House January 6 committee made four criminal referrals of Trump to the Department of Justice. Its investigation continues.

The January 6 committee outlined how Pence refused to go along with Trump’s plan to block certification, after advisers told him he did not have the authority to do so.

On the plane to Iowa on Monday, Trump falsely claimed again Pence “had the right” to refuse to certify results.

Pence was otherwise a doggedly loyal vice-president but he is now preparing his own presidential bid. He addressed Trump’s culpability for the riot on Saturday, in remarks to the Gridiron dinner in Washington.

“President Trump was wrong,” he said. “I had no right to overturn the election, and his reckless words endangered my family and everyone at the

Capitol that day, and I know that history will hold Donald Trump accountable.”

On January 6, some rioters chanted “Hang Mike Pence” while a makeshift gallows was erected outside. Pence was spirited to safety by his Secret Service detail, whose fears amid the chaos were highlighted by the January 6 committee.

“What happened that day was a disgrace,” Pence said on Saturday, adding: “For as long as I live, I will never, ever diminish the injuries sustained, the lives lost, or the heroism of law enforcement on that tragic day.”

Pence has, however, resisted a subpoena for testimony in the justice department investigation.

On Monday, Norm Eisen, a former White House ethics chief, said: “Pence says he thinks history will hold Trump accountable. But Pence himself is not willing to do so. If he were, he’d quit making the baseless argument that the constitution grants him absolute immunity from testifying.”

Trump dominates polling regarding the Republican nomination. His strongest rival is the Florida governor, Ron DeSantis, who has not yet declared a campaign.

Pence and the former South Carolina governor Nikki Haley are in the next tier, far behind but with the potential to split the vote, giving Trump the nomination without a majority.

On his way to Iowa, Trump told reporters: “I guess [Pence] figured that being nice is not working. But, you know, he’s out there campaigning. And he’s trying very hard. And he’s a nice man, I’ve known him, I had a very good relationship until the end.”

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North Korea's missile test on Tuesday came as the US and South Korea held military drills designed to counter growing threats from Pyongyang. Photograph: ���N�ʐM��/AP

North Korea

North Korea escalates tensions with fresh ballistic missile tests

Launch comes days after Pyongyang fired two 'strategic' missiles in an apparent protest over Washington-Seoul military drills

- North and South Korean tensions explained in 30 seconds

Agence France-Presse
Mon 13 Mar 2023 20.39 EDT

North Korea fired two short-range ballistic missiles Tuesday, Seoul said, Pyongyang's second launch in three days and the first since South Korea and the United States began their largest joint military drills in five years.

Washington and Seoul have ramped up defence cooperation in the face of growing military and nuclear threats from the North, which has conducted a series of increasingly provocative banned weapons tests in recent months.

"Our military detected two short-range ballistic missiles fired towards the East Sea from Jangyon area in South Hwanghae province from 0741 (2241 GMT) to 0751," the joint chiefs of staff said in a statement, referring to the body of water also known as the Sea of Japan.

"Our military has strengthened surveillance and vigilance in preparation for additional launches, while maintaining a full readiness posture through close cooperation between South Korea and the United States."

The launch comes just days after Pyongyang fired two "strategic cruise missiles" from a submarine in an apparent protest over the US-South Korea drills.

Known as Freedom Shield, the drills started Monday and will run for 10 days as part of the allies' drive to counter North Korea's growing threats.

In a rare move, Seoul's military this month revealed that the allies' special forces units were staging military exercises dubbed "Teak Knife" -- which involve simulating precision strikes on key facilities in North Korea -- ahead of Freedom Shield.

The Freedom Shield exercises focus on the "changing security environment" due to North Korea's redoubled aggression, the allies said.

They will "involve wartime procedures to repel potential North Korean attacks and conduct a stabilisation campaign in the North", the South Korean military has said.

It emphasised that the exercise was a "defensive one based on a combined operational plan".


US army helicopters at a training field in Yeoncheon, near the border with North Korea on Monday. Photograph: Ahn Young-joon/AP

But North Korea views all such exercises as rehearsals for invasion and has repeatedly warned it would take “overwhelming” action in response.

Last year, North Korea declared itself an “irreversible” nuclear power and fired a record-breaking number of missiles.

Leader Kim Jong-un earlier this month ordered his military to intensify drills to prepare for a “real war”.

Washington has repeatedly restated its “ironclad” commitment to defending South Korea, including using the “full range of its military capabilities, including nuclear”.

South Korea, for its part, is eager to reassure its increasingly nervous public about the US commitment to so-called extended deterrence, in which US military assets, including nuclear weapons, serve to prevent attacks on allies.

Analysts previously said North Korea would probably use the drills as an excuse to carry out more missile launches and perhaps even a nuclear test.

“More missile launches with variations in style and scope should be expected, with even a nuclear test. More acts of intimidation from North Korea should not come as a surprise,” said Chun In-bum, a retired South Korean army general.

It is also an opportunity for Pyongyang to try to show that its “reason for developing missiles is for self-defence purposes,” said Go Myong-hyun, a researcher at the Asan Institute for Policy Studies in Seoul.

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A hippo in the lagoon at Hacienda Nápoles park, once the private estate of Pablo Escobar, in Colombia. Photograph: Fernando Vergara/AP

The age of extinctionColombia

Colombia floats new strategy for Escobar’s hippos: ship them abroad

Since the drug lord’s imported hippos escaped after his death in 1993, the government has repeatedly failed to tame the booming population

The age of extinction is supported by

About this content

Luke Taylor in Puerto Nare

Tue 14 Mar 2023 05.30 EDTLast modified on Tue 14 Mar 2023 15.19 EDT

The first time a hippo emerged from the trees, waddled cumbersomely across the grass and slid down the river bank into the murky brown waters of the Cocorná River, the fishermen in Las Angelitas froze in awe.

“We’d heard rumours of these hippos and seen footprints downriver but as we’ve never been to a zoo we’d never seen an animal like that in real life,” says Franki de Jesús Zapata Ciron. “An animal all the way from Africa, here!? It seemed curious and beautiful.” Local families stopped working and gathered to gaze at the three-tonne beast, Zapata recalls.

But like previous chapters of Colombia’s 30-year saga with Pablo Escobar’s hippos, what started as a curious and exotic experiment eventually became a plague and source of division.

The hippo that sauntered into the river that day is one of scores that can be traced back to the drug lord, who imported four of the giant mammals from Africa to join the giraffes, camels, ostriches and other exotic animals in the menagerie at his lavish Hacienda Nápoles estate in the 1980s.

Since the hippos escaped after the capo's death in 1993, the government has repeatedly failed to tame the booming population who have made the Magdalena River basin their new home.

map

It tried culling the animals in 2009 but had to stop after a graphic photo caused national outrage. It continues to sterilise the hippos, but they are breeding faster than local experts can find, catch and castrate them.

Now the regional government wants to try a new strategy. Like Escobar's cocaine, they hope Pablo's pets can be shipped abroad. The government of Antioquia state in north-west Colombia says it is negotiating with a park in India, where it plans to send 60 of the beasts, and a sanctuary in Mexico, where it wants to ship 10.

"It would be a great relief," Zapata says from the porch of his riverside wooden house by the river. "Please, if other countries can help, take them all."



A warning sign for hippos is seen near Hacienda Nápoles park. Photograph: Anadolu Agency/Getty Images

The first two hippos that made their homes in Las Angelitas in 2016 were largely peaceful but a year later the pair had their first calf and quickly became territorial and aggressive.

Now eight hippos live nearby, and the local community has had to learn ways to avoid deadly confrontations. They avoid fishing in the same area if the hippos are around and leave a light on outside at night to stop them tipping their boats over or making unwanted house visits.

But as the population grows its impact is increasingly difficult to manage. Metre-wide muddy trenches in the grassy riverbank less than a hundred metres from Zapata's family home mark where the hippos regularly slide into the waters to cool off.

"Often we simply can't go out at night to fish any more as it's too dangerous and there is less to catch as the hippos scare them away," he says.

Just 10 miles west of Las Angelitas, where the Cocorná river meets the Magdalena, residents have more affection for the giant mammals. "Everyone here is a bit afraid of them and we know they are a social problem," says Noraldo Garzón, who runs the local shop in Estación Cocorná. "But if you

were to ask people here if they want to get rid of them tomorrow, no way. They are a very endearing species and the people here have grown to like them."



Fisherman Franki de Jesús Zapata Ciron: 'An animal all the way from Africa, here!? It seemed curious and beautiful.' Photograph: Luke Taylor

With its nondescript houses, blaring reggaeton and humid climate, little distinguishes Estación Cocorná from other Colombian riverside settlements – besides its colourful statue of a fisherman and his dog on a boat, a monument to the village's history of fishing.

But now the community has a new industry that is easier and more lucrative: hippo tourism. "We don't want them to be sterilised or killed," says 38-year-old Álvaro Díaz, a fisherman repairing his boat who also charges tourists to see the animals. "We've learnt how to cohabit with the hippopotamus and can read their body language so we know when they're angry and want to be left alone.

"And besides, they were born here. They're Colombians too now."

Cocorná's location helps explain the contrasting opinions. It is far enough away from the bulky beasts that residents do not come into direct contact

with them but close enough that they can make a quick buck from ferrying tourists upriver on boats.

But such harmonious coexistence is likely to change soon, biologists predict. From the original four hippos that escaped from Escobar's country estate about 130 exist today – the largest population outside of Africa. With no crocodiles, lions or any other African predators to keep them in check their population will keep growing exponentially. One study estimated that by 2034 the hippos will number 1,400.

"Several censuses have been conducted in recent years and every time their populations exceed our predictions," says Jorge Moreno-Bernal, a biologist at Universidad del Norte and co-author of the study. "It's paradise out there for them."

Studies of their environmental impact have warned that the invasive species are damaging the ecosystem in the Magdalena – the largest river in one of the most biodiverse countries in the world. Each hippo eats about 40kg of grass a night meaning their excrement alone is poisoning the water, killing fish and jeopardising the river's rich biodiversity. At risk are myriad endemic or endangered species such as the West Indian manatee, Neotropical otter and spectacled caiman.

The hippos are also increasingly coming into conflict with the local people and hippo attacks have become more common in recent years.

Luis Enrique, 46, was collecting water at a nearby farm in 2020 when he heard what he thought was a herd of cattle running towards him. It turned out to be a cantankerous male hippopotamus that broke his ribs and right leg, leaving him unconscious for three days and hospitalised for more than a month.

With their bulbous frame and tiny legs, the hippos may seem ungainly, but they can run at speeds of 30mph (48km/h).


Hippos in the lagoon at Hacienda Nápoles park. Photograph: Fernando Vergara/AP

Enrique, who walks with crutches, says he was unable to discuss the animals as he did not want to be involved in the politics and local division that they have created.

Experts studying the hippo invasion say the plan to ship the animals abroad will probably be the latest to fail. When foreign hunters were requested by the local environmental agency to killed “Pepe” in 2009, a photo of soldiers posing with the giant grey carcass caused outcry and forced the government to U-turn. Efforts to sterilise the animals have proved slow, dangerous and costly at about £7,000 per animal. Sometimes the darts do not pierce the skin and on occasion the tranquilliser is ineffective, while too high a dose could kill the animals.

Exporting hippopotamus would probably mean having to capture them, perform blood tests for diseases, sterilising them, and then sending them overseas in custom-made crates via a caravan of helicopters after a quarantine period, says Gina Paola Serna, a biologist tasked with sterilising the animals.

“It’s not realistic. It’s just another way to avoid taking the unpopular but necessary decision to cull them,” Moreno-Bernal says.

A few hippos were moved to a local zoo in the past but the operation was almost abandoned at the last minute because the animals were too heavy to transport, he added.

Though exporting the hippos alone is not a solution it could be useful alongside other strategies such as sterilisation, David Echeverri López, a spokesman for Cornare, the local environmental agency that would run the operation, says.

> We have to live in conflict with these animals as we also live from the river, but the anxiety it brings is tough

Alvaro Molinas

For the fishermen in Las Angelitas, sterilisation would be preferred but at this stage they say that if killing the animals is necessary they would support it. “The kids play football just there,” says one resident, pointing at a patch of grass next to her house. “It’s a miracle they haven’t thrown a rock at them or something.”

At a recent meeting of the local fishing association several members said if the state remained unable to deal with the problem the local community might have to take matters into their own hands. Rumours abound that they already have – and that hippo tastes just like grilled pork.

A kilometre downriver from Zapata’s house, fisherman Alvaro Molinas recalls an unexpected evening encounter with one of the creatures when a female emerged from the water next to his canoe. He split an oar in two in the scuffle but could have lost more if he were on land. “We have to live in conflict with these animals as we also live from the river, but the anxiety it brings is tough,” he says.

Zapata fears there is no real option but to continue living with Escobar’s legacy.

“I’ve asked the local government if they will support me if I lose a limb or my boat is damaged by the hippos but they have no answer. Yet if we shoot one they will be here immediately and we’ll be thrown in prison. What are we supposed to do?”

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Biden announces executive order strengthening background checks on gun sales – video

Joe Biden

Joe Biden unveils executive order to crack down on law-breaking gun sellers

Merrick Garland, the attorney general, tasked with moving the country ‘as close to universal background checks as possible’

Abené Clayton in Los Angeles and David Smith in Washington
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Joe Biden announced on Tuesday a new slate of executive actions that are aimed at reducing gun violence and the proliferation of guns that are sold to prohibited people.

The president spoke at a community center in Monterey Park, California, meeting victims’ families and community members devastated by a mass shooting that claimed 11 lives and injured nine other people in January following a large lunar new year festival in the city’s downtown.

Biden began his speech with a somber acknowledgment of the victims at Star dance studio, as well as Brandon Tsay, an employee at another ballroom dance hall who disarmed the attacker before he could begin shooting at a second location.

“We all saw a day of festivity and light turn into a day of fear and darkness. A holiday of hope and possibility marked by horror and pain … a sense of safety shattered,” Biden told the crowd. “Survivors will always carry the physical and emotional scars.”

Opinion polls show that a majority of both Democrats and Republicans support universal background checks that would reveal whether a person is a convicted criminal or domestic abuser before allowing them to buy a gun. But with Republicans in control of the House of Representatives, there is little hope of Congress heeding Biden's pleas to pass legislation.

On a swing through California, the president acknowledged this political reality and unveiled an executive order to enforce existing laws against gun sellers who, knowingly or otherwise, currently fail to run the background checks they should.

On a conference call with reporters, a senior administration official said last year's bipartisan gun safety legislation – the most sweeping of its kind in three decades – "created an opening" for Biden to direct the attorney general to move the US as close to universal background checks as possible without additional legislation.

He will ask Garland to clarify the statutory definition of who is "engaged in the business" of dealing in firearms, the official said. "Number one, to make it clear that those who are wilfully violating the law need to come into compliance with the law and, number two, to make it clear to people who may not realise that, under that statutory definition they are indeed in the business of selling firearms, they must become federally licensed firearm dealers and they must run background checks before gun sales."



A woman bows before portraits of Monterey Park shooting victims killed in January 2023. Photograph: Jim Ruymen/UPI/Rex/Shutterstock

The administration argues that this will mean fewer guns sold without background checks and therefore fewer guns ending up in the hands of criminals and domestic abusers. Garland will also devise a plan to stop gun dealers whose licenses have been revoked or surrendered from continuing to trade.

Biden is also directing his administration to create protocols to support people who survive and are directly affected by mass shootings, including both high-profile incidents and those that have not been covered as widely in the press. The US has already exceeded 100 mass shootings this year.

Many states have victim compensation programs to reimburse victims of violent crimes such as assault, robbery and homicide, and the Department of Justice offers some money for states to distribute after mass violence through the anti-terrorism and emergency assistance program. But this new federal provision is explicitly designed to help victims of mass shootings, so that the response is not left solely to community organizers and residents.

“Our trauma matters no matter how many media cameras are there and how many news stories run on what happens,” said Greg Jackson, executive

director of Community Justice Action Fund, a national non-profit that supports and advocates for local violence prevention programs.

Following the mass shooting at Tops grocery store in Buffalo, New York, in May 2022, the organization called on the White House to create support for victims and survivors of mass violence.

"For too long we were letting local communities and survivors pick up the pieces and navigate through this," Jackson said. "We haven't had enough support on the ground, these [executive actions] are gonna require other agencies to get in the game."

There will also be an effort to hold the gun industry accountable by naming and shaming federally licensed firearms dealers who are violating the law. Garland will release Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives records from the inspection of firearms dealers cited for breaking laws.

> Our trauma matters no matter how many media cameras are there and how many news stories run on what happen

Greg Jackson

The executive order also aims to boost public awareness of "red-flag" laws that allow individuals to petition a court to allow police to confiscate weapons from a person adjudged dangerous to themselves or others.

These extreme risk protection orders have been enacted in 19 states and the District of Columbia but, the White House noted, are only effective if the public knows when and how to use them. Biden's cabinet will be asked to work with law enforcement officials, healthcare providers, educators and other community leaders to ensure their effective use and to promote the safe storage of guns.

Encouraging states to increase their use of red flag laws has been a central part of the administration's attempts to decrease gun violence following an unprecedented single-year uptick in homicides, mostly with guns.

This includes educating teachers, police officers and healthcare providers on how and when they can petition a local court to get an order to have firearms

taken from someone at risk of injuring themselves or others. But the Biden administration is up against staunch resistance from local law enforcement who believe red flag laws infringe on people's right to carry and own guns.

Many counties have passed resolutions to declare themselves "second amendment sanctuaries" where officials and law enforcement vow not to enforce gun restrictions and red flag laws. By 2021 nearly 2,000 US counties across 40 states had passed some form of such legislation, according to Gun Owners of America, a lobbying group that advocates on behalf of firearm owners.

The senior administration official insisted that, whatever the likely resistance from Republicans and certain localities, the president's actions enjoy broad support. "These are not controversial solutions anywhere except for in Washington DC in Congress. The actions the president is proposing to move closer to universal background checks are just common sense.

"Similarly, safe storage, extreme protection orders, these are things that have the support of the vast majority of Americans. The vast majority of Americans are looking for a leader in Washington who will take charge and make their community safer and that is exactly what the president is doing here."

Biden, who has previously called gun violence in America "an epidemic" and "international embarrassment", will further order efforts to counter a sharp rise in the loss or theft of firearms during shipping, enlist the Pentagon in improving public safety practices and encourage the Federal Trade Commission to issue a report analysing how gun makers market firearms to children, including through the use of military imagery.

In addition, he will seek to improve federal support for gun violence survivors, victims and survivors' families. The White House pointed out in a press release that, when a hurricane overwhelms a community, the Federal Emergency Management Agency steps in.

But when a mass shooting does so, "no coordinated US government mechanism exists to meet short- and long-term needs, such as mental health care for grief and trauma, financial assistance (for example, when a family

loses the sole breadwinner or when a small business is shut down due to a lengthy shooting investigation), and food (for example, when the Buffalo shooting closed down the only grocery store in the neighborhood)”.

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A candlelit vigil as part of Kampala's Transgender Day of Remembrance, held to pay tribute to victims of hate crimes around the world. Photograph: Sumy Sadruni/AFP/Getty Images

Global development

LGBTQ+ groups face crackdowns in Uganda as environment turns hostile

Activists fear a systematic 'witch-hunt' against sexual minorities by parliament, police and religious conservatives

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About this content

Caroline Kimeu and Achola Rosario

Tue 14 Mar 2023 02.00 EDTLast modified on Wed 15 Mar 2023 07.11 EDT

A dramatic surge in attacks on LGBTQ+ people in Uganda has been recorded by rights groups this year, as the environment for sexual minorities turns increasingly hostile.

More than 110 people reported incidents including arrests, sexual violence, evictions and public undressing, to advocacy group Sexual Minorities Uganda (Smug) in February alone. Transgender people were disproportionately affected, said the group.

“We haven’t seen anything like this in years,” said Frank Mugisha, director of Smug.

It comes just days after Ugandan MPs reintroduced a controversial anti-homosexuality bill, which would punish gay sex and “recruitment, promotion and funding” of same-sex “activities”. Religious groups in Uganda have been vocal in their condemnation of homosexuality.

Attempts to introduce a similar anti-gay law in 2013 were struck down, but not without a “notable increase” in police abuse and extortion, evictions and

harassment.

A leaked report by the ministry of internal affairs' showed that as of January, 26 organisations were or had been under government investigation over involvement in LGBTQ+ advocacy. Mugisha called the move a "witch-hunt".

"It is part of a deliberate, calculated, very systematic move by groups within government, parliament and the conservative evangelicals trying to erase the LGBTQ+ community," said Mugisha.

Smug's operations were suspended in August because it had failed to register. Smug said it had made several attempts to register the organisation. Uganda also declined to renew the mandate of the Office of the UN high commissioner for human rights (OHCHR), which will expire at the end of this month.

Rights campaigners claim the crackdowns are a diversionary tactic to shift public attention from issues including corruption scandals and spiralling public debt.

Smug said it had received reports of people having to flee their homes to avoid arrest by police tipped off by the public. Attacks have taken place at private events, parties and football games. Three trans women were arrested at their homes in the capital, Kampala, last month, andcharged with committing "unnatural offences" and subjected to anal examinations.

Last week, a teacher at a girls' school in Jinja, east of the capital, was arrested over allegations of "promoting homosexuality" at the school, amid suspicion she was a lesbian.

"It's a madhouse," said Mugisha, adding that his organisation is overwhelmed by the numbers who need help. Smug campaigners say they are having to vet calls carefully and increase security measures.

"Things have escalated to the worst. Before, there was fear from law enforcement but not fear from communities, from ordinary Ugandans like we are seeing now," he said.



Members of Uganda's LGBT community appear in court after 125 people were arrested at a gay-friendly bar in Kampala, November 2019. Photograph: Isaac Kasamani/AFP/Getty Images

Trans people have been most affected by the violence, reported by Smug.

"Being the face of the LGBTQ+ community makes us targets," said John Mukisa*, a trans man who has been transitioning for about six years through self-managed hormone therapy. Over the past two years, Mukisa, 36, has been subjected to arrests, as well as physical and sexual attacks.

"You always have to do 'something extra' to remain alive," he said.

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In 2021, he says he was beaten, arrested and questioned over his sexuality and gender identity. Mukisa, who is yet to undergo sex reassignment surgery, reports being placed in a cell with male inmates, despite his pleas against it, where he was allegedly raped , encouraged by police authorities – a traumatising attack from which he says he contracted HIV.

Transitioning in Uganda is difficult with few medical providers willing to offer hormone therapy, and people who want to undertake sex reassignment surgery need to travel out of the country – placing it out of reach for the majority.

Trans people can legally change their names and IDs, but the procedure for doing so is not specified, and leaves a lot to the discretion of the National Identification and Registration Authority. Activists say that laws which indirectly criminalise trans people, such as impersonation and public indecency, or those that criminalise same-sex relations, add intense scrutiny.

“The law says one thing and allows you to make these changes, but in practice the journey to actually exercise these rights means that you encounter a lot of really harsh homophobia,” said Noah Mirembe, a human rights lawyer. “There are a lot of demands to strip down and undress to prove your [manhood or womanhood], and trans people are constantly expected to put up with those forms of intrusion.”



A member of Uganda's transgender community poses for a photographer before attending events for a Transgender Day of Remembrance in Kampala, November, 2019. Photograph: Sumy Sadruni/AFP/Getty Images

Mukisa, a former nurse, managed to change his national ID to reflect his preferred gender. He tries to help other trans people to navigate the process, but says it was much easier to do a few years ago. Mukisa adds, however, that he has been unable to change his academic certificates from his old name due to pushback from national exam bodies and professional nursing associations, which he says has stunted his professional and educational career.

"I can't compete in the mainstream economic world," said Mukisa, who is unemployed. Most trans people he knows have to become self-employed or work with the few, mainly poorly funded LGBTQ+ organisations.

Mukisa says that today's anti-LGBTQ+ environment in Uganda will marginalise people further.

"People are living in fear and in hiding," he said. "This whole situation is setting us back."

* Name changed

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Even though vaping is illegal before the age of 18, NHS figures for 2021 showed that 9% of 11- to 15-year-old children used e-cigarettes. Photograph: AleksandrYu/Getty Images/iStockphoto

E-cigarettes

UK health expert raises alarm at vaping ‘epidemic’ among teenagers

Leading respiratory doctor fears generation could end up with long-term addictions and lung damage

- ‘Beside himself with craving’: the teenagers hooked on vaping

Rachel Hall and *Clea Skopeliti*
Sat 18 Mar 2023 03.00 EDTLast modified on Sat 18 Mar 2023 05.47 EDT

One of the UK’s leading respiratory doctors has raised the alarm about the exploding popularity of vaping among teenagers, saying that without urgent

regulation a generation could end up with long-term addictions and lung damage.

Dr Mike McKean, vice-president of policy for the Royal College of Paediatricians and Child Health, said vaping was becoming an "epidemic" among teenagers even though it is illegal before the age of 18. If its rapid growth maintains the same trajectory, almost all children will vape within five years, he said.

He estimated that prevalence could now be as high as 15%, after NHS figures for 2021 showed that 9% of 11- to 15-year-old children used e-cigarettes, up from 6% in 2018, and a figure which rises to 18% for 15-year-olds. Meanwhile, 2022 figures for Scotland showed levels at 10% for 15- to 16-year-olds.

"This is a problem the UK should take seriously. Walk past a school at closing time and you'll see what happens – large numbers of children vaping," he said.

"That's huge amounts of children spending money on products that are not cheap, and they're inhaling chemicals we don't know the long-term effects of. There can be large amounts of nicotine, especially in vapes from overseas, and children are becoming addicted to a drug."

He said there is "lots of evidence" to suggest that many children start vaping despite never having smoked before, meaning they are not using it as a tool to quit, that children as young as 9-10 are vaping, and anecdotal evidence that some children move on to cigarettes.

Vaping involves inhaling nicotine in a vapour rather than smoke, removing the two most harmful elements of smoking, burning tobacco and producing tar or carbon monoxide, which makes it a good tool for weaning smokers off cigarettes.

However, its long-term health effects remain uncertain since it is a recent phenomenon and has grown rapidly in popularity. McKean said it is "a concern" given what we know about the risks of tobacco smoke and

environmental pollution, especially for lungs that are still growing and developing.

"I don't think it's going to be a sudden thing, but it will grow over time. I've no doubt – because it's happening already in small numbers – that people's lungs will get damaged. For those who do get lung damage it could be devastating to their lives," he said.

In recent months, the clamour of calls from campaigners for tighter rules around the advertising and packaging of vapes has been growing louder. They argue that these should mirror tobacco, including plain packaging, health warnings and behind the counter display, while enforcement should be toughened to crack down on shops selling to under-18s.

Last month, England's chief medical officer, Chris Whitty, described the marketing of vapes as "utterly unacceptable".

The children's commissioner, Rachel de Souza, said that child vaping is one of her priorities for the year ahead as she has "real concerns" about the rise, especially as "we don't yet know enough about the long-term impact this might have on children's physical health".

She said: "Children have told me they want a healthy lifestyle, and they know this is important, so we urgently need to learn lessons from the past and ensure there is tighter regulation of the vaping industry as a whole – something I'll be looking to make the case for as we carry out more work on this issue."

McKean said it is "staggering" that the regulation of vapes had not been brought in line with that of cigarettes. He said the long-term impact of vaping needed to be "watched and studied in a careful way", learning lessons from mistakes made with tobacco control in which governments were "slow to bring in rules" and "many people died as a result".

The benefits of vaping are primarily as a smoking cessation tool for adults, yet it is marketed as a consumer product. McKean said that companies were taking "an insidious and quite disturbing approach" to their marketing,

lacing vapes with sweet flavours and targeting children through colourful packaging.

This was reflected in research from King's College London and Action on Smoking and Health, which found that removing branding from e-cigarettes could deter teenagers from buying them without reducing their appeal to adults. Their study of 2,469 11- to 18-year-olds and 12,026 adults found that teenagers were more likely to say their peers would have no interest in vapes when marketed in standardised white or green packaging, whereas adults said their interest was not reduced.

Eve Taylor, the study's first author from King's, said "the ideal situation is to ensure teenagers aren't tempted to take up vaping in the first place, while not deterring adults from using vapes to stop smoking", and that the study suggested removing branding was a means of achieving that. The study's senior author Dr Katherine East, also from King's, raised the point that using the same packaging as tobacco cigarettes – standardised green – could risk reinforcing the misperception that vaping is as dangerous as smoking.

Experts said that Wednesday's spring budget could have been a prime moment to introduce tighter regulation and other measures to deter children, such as a tax. In particular, they think disposable vapes – which are most popular with children – should be targeted.

McKean thought a ban on disposable vapes, which are most popular among children, should also be considered, not least for their environmental impact – although he disagrees with the universal vaping bans of several other countries.

He said: "If this was a medicine or a drug put in a tablet it would be incredibly regulated but it's not – vaping should be regulated as a medicine. It's a tool for adults who are addicted to cigarette smoking to quit; that's where it should be, anything else should be stamped out ruthlessly."

John Dunne, the director general of the UK Vaping Industry Association (UKVIA), said: "No one under the age of 18 should be using a vape device – that's the regulations. We therefore welcome any credible research that can highlight the long-term health risks of vaping to minors.

“However, any future policy or regulation needs to concentrate on cutting sources of supply to minors and dealing with the rogue operators, not wholesale bans on the likes of flavours and disposable vapes which play a significant role in helping adult smokers quit their habits through vaping.”

A Department of Health and Social Care spokesperson said: “We are clear that children should not use vapes and have introduced regulations to prevent them from vaping.

“The law protects children from vapes through restricting sales to over-18s only, limiting nicotine content, refill bottle and tank sizes, labelling requirements, and through advertising restrictions.

“Adverts for vapes and their components are prohibited from featuring anything likely to be of particular appeal to people under the age of 18, such as characters or celebrities they would be familiar with.”

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The proportion of teenagers who vape rose from 3.3% in 2021 to 7% last year, according to Action on Smoking and Health. Photograph: Addictive Stock Creatives/Alamy

E-cigarettes

‘Beside himself with craving’: the teenagers hooked on vaping

One mother says son loved mountain biking but a year later ‘he’s not interested – he runs out of breath’

- UK health expert raises alarm at ‘epidemic’ of vaping among teenagers

Clea Skopeliti
Sat 18 Mar 2023 03.00 EDT

When Sarah caught her 13-year-old son vaping in his room last year, he tried a classic teenage line on her. “He said: ‘It’s not mine, it’s my friend’s,’”

remembers the teacher from West Yorkshire. "I said: 'Yeah, pull the other one, it's got bells on.'"

Liam*, now 14, first tried vaping with two friends after one of them sneaked a parent's vape. "They'd been watching videos on TikTok showing tricks you can do," says Sarah. "I think they thought it was cool."

Between 2021 and 2022, the proportion of 11- to 17-year-olds in Britain who vape rose from 3.3% to 7%, according to Action on Smoking and Health (Ash). The proportion of those who had tried vaping increased from 11.2% to 15.8%.

A year on, Sarah describes her son as "completely addicted". When she first caught him vaping, she "dropped down on him really hard". "We grounded him and took everything off him," she says. He told her he didn't realise it was addictive; he thought he'd be able to stop easily.

But a month later he was caught stealing a vape. She was "disgusted" and made him pay the shopkeeper back and write a letter of apology. Feeling "backed into a corner", Sarah decided to change tack and buy him a refillable vape herself; she hopes she can support him to quit by reducing the strength of the e-liquid.

Liam still vapes every day. He tried to quit last October, announcing one morning that he had smashed up his vape and was going to stop. But when he got home from school that afternoon, he told his mother that he had had "the worst day of his life".

"He was just beside himself with craving," says Sarah, adding he had begged her to go and buy him a vape. "He just couldn't calm down – he was saying: 'I'm never going to be able to stop.' It broke my heart."

Most experts agree that vaping carries far lower health risks than smoking, says Ann McNeill, professor of tobacco addiction at King's College London. "Nicotine is an addictive substance but not the one that kills," she says. But nuance is important: "If you've got something very dangerous and something much less dangerous, it doesn't mean it's harmless."

McNeill last year led an evidence review examining biomarkers of potential harm – measures of biological changes – due to vaping or smoking. “The message from the data was that it’s substantially less harmful than smoking, but not risk free. If you smoke, there’s never going to be a situation when it won’t be safer to vape, but if you’ve never smoked, don’t take up the product.”

The rise of the disposable vape has been meteoric. In 2021, just 7.7% of teenage vapers used them; by 2022, this figure had jumped to 52%, according to Ash. Teenage smoking continues to decline, and for the first time in 2022, the majority of children who had tried vaping did so having never smoked.

McNeill acknowledges that “disposables seem to be more attractive to the younger audience”. “I think that is something we need to look at – if we are seeing ‘never smokers’ taking up disposables, we need to make sure we’re enforcing the law so that these products can’t be sold quite so readily as they clearly are at the moment.”

Sarah says her son was able to buy vapes “very easily”. “He never got challenged – he is tall but there is no way he looks 18, he’s got a baby face. He can’t even get into a 15 at the cinema.”

Liam used to be “mad into mountain biking” but he is “just not interested now – he runs out of breath”, Sarah says. He vapes throughout the day: on the way to school, in the toilets between every lesson, during breaks and on the way home.

It is a story that plays out in many secondary schools. Whereas before the summer holidays, Laura*, a secondary school teacher in Tyne and Wear, would catch a student vaping once a fortnight, lately it’s an everyday occurrence: “From about 13 upwards, many of them have vapes – as soon as they’re out of the school gates they go in their pockets.”

Laura says she has noticed a change in students’ behaviour in class. “You can see when they’re starting to get edgy before break time,” she says. “They might get a bit snappy or angsty. They will then go to the toilets to vape because they haven’t had any for two or three hours in lessons.”

The school has a zero-tolerance policy to vaping on the premises; when students are caught, the e-cigarettes are confiscated and parents or guardians are informed. She says the reaction from parents is mixed; while many are “concerned and disappointed”, some have the opposite reaction, “giving [the vape] back to the student in front of us, and then the students tell us their parent bought the vape for them”.

“Students see it as the norm,” she explains. “Their parents vape, their friends vape. If we’re teaching about smoking, they say it’s disgusting. They see [vaping] as a totally different thing.”

While he may have cadged the odd cigarette at a party, Dan, 19, has never been a smoker. The student from Cambridgeshire is angry about what he sees as vape companies angling their product towards teenagers. “It’s so clearly targeted to the younger generation,” he says. “All the fruity flavours – someone who has been smoking for 20 years doesn’t need a strawberry ice-cream vape. I don’t know anybody who smokes.”

Dan started vaping at 17 after he and three friends bought disposable vapes for a party. “We’d seen people doing it around school and wanted to try it. It was pure stupidity,” he says. “All four of us [now] vape every day, for the past year and a half.”

He began vaping regularly soon after; he had no problem getting them from the corner shop. “It just snowballed – I started buying them every time one died. I hate it so much, it’s so difficult to quit. Among kids and teens it’s such a big problem.”

These days, he goes through two or three disposable vapes a week. He has been trying to quit since January, but is finding it tough: it’s just too easy to vape. “It’s constantly just there – say you smoke cigarettes, you’re forced to go outside. When you vape, you can do it everywhere.”

Though he is concerned about the environmental impact, Dan has only ever used disposable vapes; he finds the flavours more appealing and the convenience hard to beat. “I think they should be banned, to be honest,” he says. “Banning them will force people like me to make a mental decision to

buy a proper vape, or just stop. They have hooked the younger generation on nicotine.”

* Names have been changed

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Jon Snow revealed in an interview that he was 'much more relaxed and present as a parent' than his own father. Photograph: David Levene/The Guardian

Jon Snow

Jon Snow 'at complete ease' with becoming a father again in his 70s

Former Channel 4 News anchor and his wife, Precious Lunga, 48, had a boy via a surrogate in 2021

Tobi Thomas
*@tobithomas_*
Sat 18 Mar 2023 03.00 EDTLast modified on Sat 18 Mar 2023 06.04 EDT

The former Channel 4 News anchor Jon Snow has said he is "at complete ease" with becoming a father again in his 70s.

The broadcaster, 75, and his wife, the academic Precious Lunga, 48, welcomed a baby boy via a surrogate in March 2021 after struggling with

“medical setbacks and miscarriages”.

Speaking to the Saga Exceptional publication, Snow said: “There are three very small people in my life – two grandsons, aged one and three, and a son, Tafara, who is two going on five.

“Having him was not easy but we persisted because, at 48, my wife is a good deal younger than me, and she very much wanted and deserved a baby.”

He added: “When he was born, life felt complete.

“I’m at complete ease with late fatherhood. I don’t feel I’ll drop him, I don’t feel exhausted.

“I haven’t found age relevant to my relationship with my son or grandsons. Is being a grandad different to being a dad? Not really. In the end, it’s all love, isn’t it?”

Speaking about his parenting style, Snow said he was “much more relaxed and present as a parent” in comparison with his own father, who was an Anglican clergyman.

Speaking of his father, he said: “He was the bishop of Whitby – 6ft 7in tall and even taller in full regalia.

“I’m 6ft 4in now, but only 4ft 6in as an eight- or nine-year-old child, when it really mattered. I found him pretty scary and remote at that time, and my being sent to public school didn’t bring us any closer.

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“The idea of taking a child out of the family to educate them strikes me now as bonkers. How wonderful it might have been to sit down to do homework with my father. Never once was I able to say, ‘Dad, two and two are really four?’

“His only involvement in my education was to loudly agree with the damning reports from my teachers because, unlike Precious, who is Cambridge-educated and the boffin in our relationship, I wasn’t bright at school.”

He also has two daughters from his three-decade relationship with the human rights lawyer Madeleine Colvin.

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2023.03.18 - Spotlight

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‘They stole my childhood’: Paris Hilton on teenage trauma, sex tapes and having a baby by surrogate

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Photograph: Andy Hall/The Guardian

Blind dateLife and style

Blind date: ‘She tried to bring up politics but I was worried she was more

leftwing than me’

Mariana, 34, a publishing rights manager, meets Oliver, 32, an account manager at a creative agency

Sat 18 Mar 2023 02.00 EDT

Mariana on Oliver



What were you hoping for?
Not to make a fool of myself, as everyone I know (and have dated) reads the Guardian.

First impressions?
He was fashionably early, which is always a good sign.

What did you talk about?
How London is the best city in the world. The greatness of Abba. Oil companies and the cost of living (is anyone talking about anything else?). How we’re both going to the same Ezra Collective gig.

Most awkward moment?
It was never awkward and we had the gig to talk about. But I don't think there was much back and forth.

Good table manners?
There was lots of rice on the table when we finished – which I think is a sign of a good meal (or a small table).

Best thing about Oliver?
He is keen on making the most of living in London.

Would you introduce Oliver to your friends?
I think my friends' energy might scare him a bit.

Describe Oliver in three words.
Friendly, punctual, foodie.

What do you think he made of you?
That I'm way too obsessed with east London.

Did you go on somewhere?
No.

Q&A

Fancy a blind date?

Show

Blind date is Saturday's dating column: every week, two strangers are paired up for dinner and drinks, and then spill the beans to us, answering a set of questions. This runs, with a photograph we take of each dater before the date, in Saturday magazine (in the UK) and online at theguardian.com every Saturday. It's been running since 2009 – you can read all about how we put it together here.

What questions will I be asked?
We ask about age, location, occupation, hobbies, interests and the type of

person you are looking to meet. If you do not think these questions cover everything you would like to know, tell us what's on your mind.

Can I choose who I match with?
No, it's a blind date! But we do ask you a bit about your interests, preferences, etc – the more you tell us, the better the match is likely to be.

Can I pick the photograph?
No, but don't worry: we'll choose the nicest ones.

What personal details will appear?
Your first name, job and age.

How should I answer?
Honestly but respectfully. Be mindful of how it will read to your date, and that Blind date reaches a large audience, in print and online.

Will I see the other person's answers?
No. We may edit yours and theirs for a range of reasons, including length, and we may ask you for more details.

Will you find me The One?
We'll try! Marriage! Babies!

Can I do it in my home town?
Only if it's in the UK. Many of our applicants live in London, but we would love to hear from people living elsewhere.

How to apply
Email blind.date@theguardian.com

Was this helpful?

Thank you for your feedback.

And ... did you kiss?
No.

If you could change one thing about the evening, what would it be?
I would have ordered dessert. Also a bit more banter.

Marks out of 10?
I think everyone always deserves a gold star – that’s why I could never be a teacher!

Would you meet again?
We will probably bump into each other at that gig, but I don’t think there is a spark between us.



Mariana and Oliver on their date

Oliver on Mariana



What were you hoping for?
To meet someone new, with similar interests and a potential spark.

First impressions?
Punctual (we both arrived five minutes early), a little nervous and pretty.

What did you talk about?
Work. Football. Travel. Music. Swimming in cold water. Film. TV. A bit of Brazilian and UK politics.

Most awkward moment?
She tried to bring up politics but I worried she was more leftwing than me and we'd clash.

Good table manners?
Impeccable.

Best thing about Mariana?
She has lots of interests, including great music taste and a passion for writing.

Would you introduce Mariana to your friends?
I don't see why not.

Describe Mariana in three words.
Stylish, friendly, interesting.

What do you think she made of you?
She probably thought I was friendly, but that there wasn't an attraction between us.

Did you go on somewhere?
No, I don't think that was ever on the cards for us.

And ... did you kiss?
No. Just a polite hug.

If you could change one thing about the evening what would it be?
If I'd known Mariana lived in east London, I wouldn't have got her to trek for an hour to west London!

Marks out of 10?
7.

Would you meet again?
Maybe if we bump into each other at the Ezra Collective gig ...

Mariana and Oliver ate at Dishoom Kensington, London W8. Fancy a blind date? Email blind.date@theguardian.com

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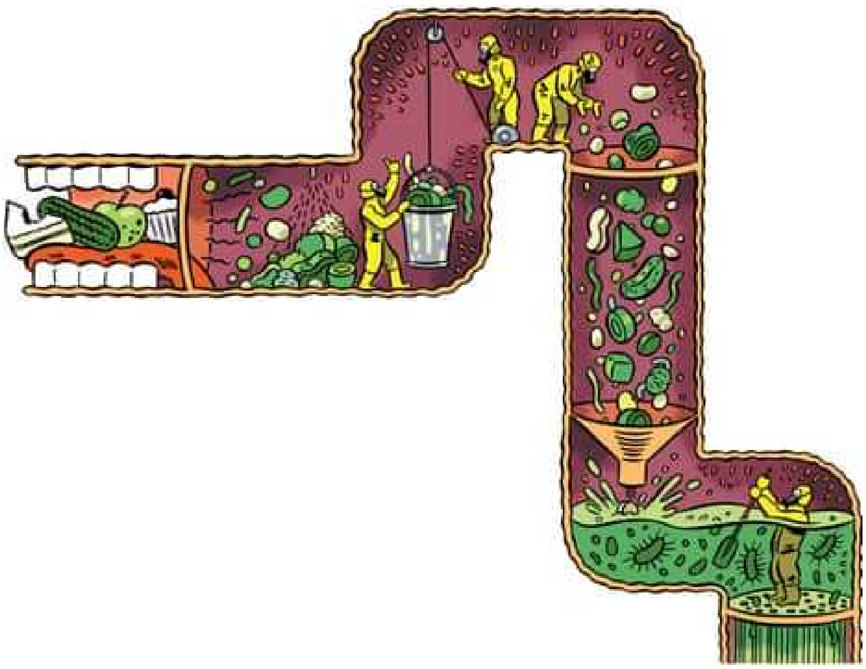


Illustration: Jason Ford

How to have a healthy gutHuman biology

What are the real signs of a healthy gut? A user’s guide

It's a huge organ that gives us the energy to live, grow and repair. But how does it work – and how do you keep it healthy? Our science editor unravels its astonishing job



Ian Sample Science editor
@iansample
Sat 18 Mar 2023 03.00 EDTLast modified on Sat 18 Mar 2023 17.25 EDT

What is the gut?

The gut, or gastrointestinal system, is the long and winding route that food and drink takes through the body. It ensures that all the beneficial nutrients are absorbed and used for energy, growth and repair. You can think of it as a number of hollow organs connected by a tube which starts at the mouth and ends at the anus. Once food has been swallowed, the oesophagus delivers it to the stomach. It then goes through the small and large intestines before waste – the material the body cannot use – is expelled as a stool. Solid organs help along the way: the liver, pancreas and gall bladder. The entire digestive tract is about 5m long in a typical adult, with the small intestine making up two-thirds, but there is plenty of variation between people. Spread the whole lot out, and the surface area of the gut that comes into contact with food is about $32m^2$. That's about half the size of a badminton court.

How does it work?

The gut is built for digestion: the breaking down of food and drink into nutrients that can be absorbed into the bloodstream. Chewing food turns it into smaller lumps for the gut to digest, a process helped by saliva. Saliva contains enzymes that break down starches and fats in food before it reaches the stomach.

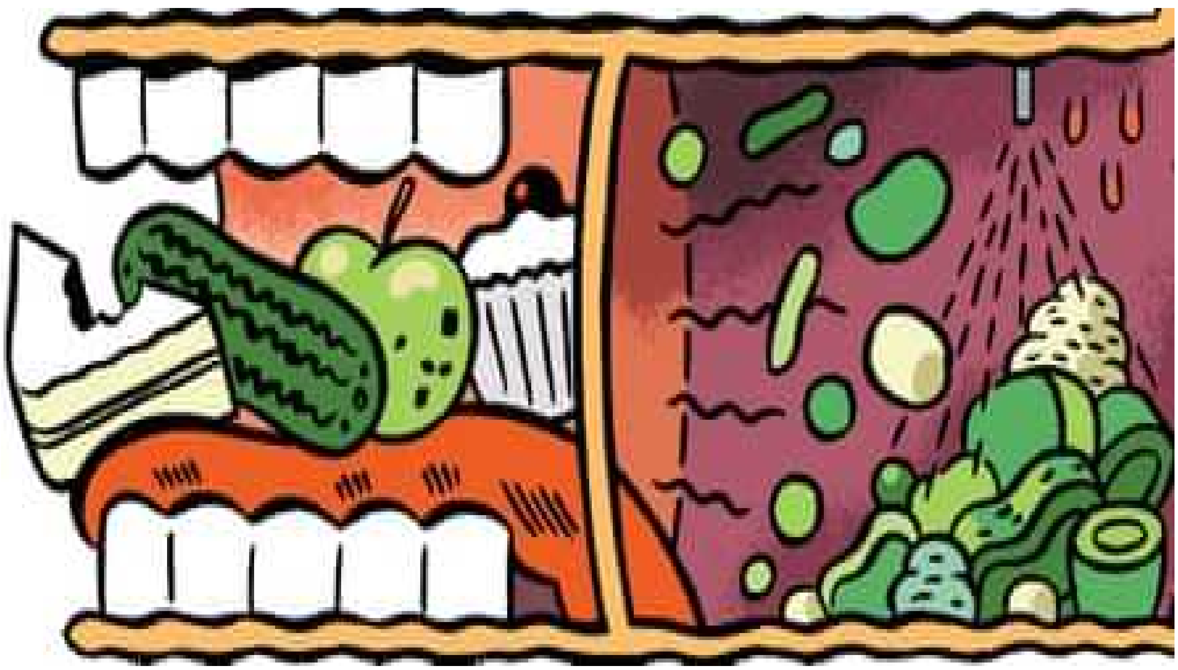


Illustration: Jason Ford

Food is moved through the digestive tract by peristalsis, where the gut walls squeeze behind the contents, much as toothpaste is squeezed from a tube. Once swallowed, food is pushed down into the stomach, which releases strong acids and enzymes to break the food down further. This produces a thick fluid called chyme which is slowly released into the small intestine.

Nearly all of the nutrients the body absorbs – from carbohydrates and vitamins to fats, proteins and minerals – are absorbed in the small intestine. Here, the solid organs lend a hand. Small ducts from the pancreas deliver digestive juice that helps break down carbohydrates, fats and proteins. Another digestive juice called bile is made by the liver and either fed into the small intestine or stored in the gall bladder to use later. Bacteria in the small intestine also get involved, releasing enzymes that help with digestion.

Once in the bloodstream, nutrients are circulated around the body, where they are used and stored by the tissues and organs.

> The ideal stool is a medium-to-dark-brown sausage shape that has a soft-to-firm consistency

Once the small intestine has absorbed all the nutrients it can, the large intestine takes on the waste. Peristalsis moves it through the colon, where water is removed to produce a stool made up of undigested food material and bacteria. It takes six to eight hours for food to pass through the stomach and small intestine, and a further 36 hours to move through the colon. At the end of the large intestine is the rectum, which stores stools until they are passed in a bowel movement.

From mouth to anus, the human gut is lined with more than 100m nerve cells that make up the enteric nervous system. This dense collection of nerves can send messages back and forth to the brain. Signals are exchanged along the left and right vagus nerves, which run from the brain down the corresponding side of the body to the large intestine. The nerves play a crucial role in healthy digestion, mucus and saliva production, immune responses, taste and bladder control, not to mention heart rate, blood pressure, breathing, mood and speech.

What keeps the gut healthy?


Illustration: Jason Ford

Given the gut's role, it's not surprising that doctors recommend a healthy diet for a healthy gut. That means fruit and vegetables every day, cutting back on sugary and fatty foods, and choosing poultry or fish over red meat. Dr Megan Rossi, a registered dietitian and research fellow at King's College London, recommends eating 30 different plant foods each week. If that sounds a bit much, bear in mind that it includes fruit and veg, wholegrains, legumes, nuts and seeds. Hitting the target could be as easy as sprinkling mixed seeds on your breakfast in the morning.

Some foods are obviously healthier than others and, although there's no formal designation, dozens are often described as "superfoods". The label means they are particularly rich in healthy nutrients, such as vitamins, minerals and antioxidants, though some are also high in fibre, healthy unsaturated fats and flavonoids. The latter include plant compounds such as apigenin, found in parsley, chamomile and celery, which has anti-inflammatory and anti-cancer properties. Dark, leafy greens such as spinach and kale, berries, avocados, cinnamon, root vegetables, garlic, ginger, green tea, lentils and salmon are regarded as superfoods, but it's not always easy to establish the health benefits of particular foods: most studies test specific constituents on cells in petri dishes or in mice.

Adults in the UK are advised to eat 30g of fibre a day but typically consume only 20g. A high-fibre diet can help digestion and prevent constipation, and is linked to lower risk of heart disease, type 2 diabetes and colorectal cancer. Fibre should come from a variety of sources, including fruit and veg, beans, nuts, seeds, oats, wholemeal bread and pasta and brown rice. It is important to drink enough water, too, which helps food pass through the digestive system. Too little can lead to dehydration, a common cause of constipation.

Physical activity, such as a walk after dinner, also helps with digestion. Moving around and letting gravity do its thing helps food to move through the gastrointestinal tract. A healthy gut has benefits far beyond the intestines themselves. “A wealth of research is coming together to highlight that gut health is central to the health of every other element of the body,” says Rossi.

> The UK has some of the highest rates of IBD in the world, but estimates vary, partly because of ambiguous diagnoses

What are the signs of a healthy gut?

Your gut has many ways of telling you when it isn’t healthy. Infections such as gastroenteritis can cause stomach pain, vomiting and diarrhoea. Lactose intolerance – an inability to digest a form of sugar found in milk and other dairy products – can leave you feeling bloated. Coeliac disease, when gluten causes the immune system to attack the gut, can trigger abdominal pain and indigestion. So an absence of pain and bloating are starters for good gut health. Bowel movements are a decent indicator, too: these should be regular and pain-free and shouldn’t involve too much pushing. The ideal stool is a medium-to-dark-brown sausage shape that has a soft-to-firm consistency. Healthy ones tend to sink and don’t stick to the toilet bowl. Floating stools are less dense, usually because they contain more gas or fat. High-fibre diets can lead to more gas in stools, as it’s released when bacteria in the colon go to work on the material. If you are eating more fat than usual, any excess that can’t be digested could make your stools float. But fatty stools can also signify problems with absorption in the gut or an inflamed pancreas (pancreatitis).

What causes common gut problems?

A whole host of conditions affect the gut from indigestion, heartburn and diarrhoea to constipation, irritable bowel syndrome and cancer. Indigestion happens when stomach acid irritates the stomach lining, or a raw patch of the stomach wall, such as an ulcer. Heartburn is similar: the burning feeling in the chest is caused by stomach acid flowing back up the oesophagus. It's often a sign that the band of muscle at the bottom of the oesophagus isn't working properly. When heartburn happens regularly it's called gastro-oesophageal reflux disease, or Gord. Some foods such as chillies, onions, garlic, tomatoes and citrus fruits can trigger heartburn, as can certain drinks, such as tea, coffee and fizzy drinks. Reducing stress and anxiety can help.



Illustration: Jason Ford

Constipation and diarrhoea are extremely common gut health problems. Constipation generally means having fewer than three bowel movements a week, and finding it difficult to pass stools. Often, constipation is the result of eating too little fibre, not drinking enough fluids, and not being physically active, but sometimes there is no obvious cause. Diarrhoea – when the stools become loose and watery – is often caused by bacterial, viral or parasitic infections in the gut.

Irritable bowel syndrome is still something of a medical mystery. The causes are unclear, but the condition can develop after severe diarrhoea-causing infections. Studies suggest that changes in gut microbes and early life stress play a role, too.

More serious diseases also affect the digestive system. Doctors estimate there are about 5m new gastrointestinal cancers each year, accounting for about a quarter of new cancers worldwide. Eating red meat, including beef, lamb and pork, and processed meats, such as sausages, bacon and salami, raise the risk of bowel cancer by an estimated 13%. Nearly a third of bowel cancers are linked to eating too little fibre, 11% to obesity and about 7% to smoking, according to Cancer Research UK.

> Peanut and tree-nut allergies were uncommon before the 1990s, but have risen to affect between 0.5% to 2.5% of children

In the UK, an estimated two million people have a diagnosed food allergy. Peanut and tree-nut allergies were uncommon before the 1990s, but have risen to affect between 0.5% to 2.5% of children. The range of foods people are allergic to has expanded, too. According to a 2007 study by St George's, University of London, UK hospital admissions for anaphylaxis due to food allergies rose sevenfold, from 16 to 107 per million children, between 1990 and 2004. What is driving the rise is unknown. One theory is that babies and infants are not as exposed to microbes that help train the immune system as much as they were in the past. Another suggests that at-risk babies – those with severe eczema, for example – have foods such as peanuts introduced into their diet too late, preventing them from building tolerance in their first year.

At least 1% of the UK population has coeliac disease. The real figure is probably much higher because mild cases can go undiagnosed or are misdiagnosed. The autoimmune disorder affects genetically susceptible people and often runs in families. It happens when the immune system mistakes gliadin, a component of gluten found in cereals such as wheat, barley and rye, for a threat. The immune system responds by releasing antibodies that inflame the gut. This flattens down the hair-like fronds called villi, which line the small intestine in their millions, impairing their ability to

absorb nutrients. Coeliac disease causes symptoms ranging from weight loss and fatigue to diarrhoea, abdominal pain and bloating. Cases have risen in the UK in recent decades, with researchers noting a four-fold increase between 1990 and 2011, but they suspect this is down to better diagnoses, rather than the condition becoming more common.

Inflammatory bowel disease, IBD, is also common. The two most prevalent forms are Crohn's disease, which can affect any part of the digestive system, and ulcerative colitis, which affects only the colon. Both involve long-term inflammation, but their root causes are unclear. The UK has some of the highest rates of IBD in the world, but estimates vary a lot, partly because of ambiguous diagnoses. As a long-term but rarely fatal disease, the total number of people with IBD in the UK population is rising, with a 2021 study in BMC Gastroenterology finding a 34% rise in prevalence in the decade to 2016. According to a 2020 report in BMJ Open, which looked at IBD in the UK between 2000 and 2018, new diagnoses were stable in children under 10, stable or falling in adults, but rising in 10- to 16-year-olds. This could be down to earlier diagnosis – people who are diagnosed with IBD at 15 are not diagnosed again at 40 – but if it reflects a surge in disease, "this is of great concern", the authors warn.

What is the gut microbiome?

Trillions of microbes, comprising thousands of species of bacteria, fungi, viruses and parasites, live inside the human gut. Most are symbiotic, meaning both the human and the microbe do well from them being there, but some can raise the risk of disease, or ramp up levels of toxins if exposed to a poor diet. As with most communities, the good tend to outnumber the bad and keep them in check, but the balance can be thrown out by diet, infections or a long course of antibiotics. This can cause the bad bacteria to proliferate, increasing the risk of diseases such as IBD, IBS, obesity and colon cancer.



Illustration: Jason Ford

In recent years, this mass of microbes, and its role in human health, has become one of the hottest topics in medicine. As a collective, they help to break down food and support digestion. Some gut bugs synthesise vitamins we struggle to obtain from our diets. In the large intestine, bugs ferment indigestible fibres, producing short chain fatty acids that reinforce the gut wall, possibly preventing certain cancers and bowel conditions.

Does the microbiome affect our broader health?

Absolutely. The microbiome is thought to affect virtually every aspect of human health. Compounds that are either produced by the bugs, or released when they degrade food, help regulate hormones, metabolism and immunity. Beyond their impact on diseases, these can affect anxiety, mood, cognition and pain. Hundreds of clinical trials are now either planned or under way to investigate what role the gut microbiome plays in a whole host of issues including the brain development of babies, autism, obesity, diabetes, coronary artery disease, gastric cancer, arthritis, Parkinson's, Alzheimer's, depression, mood disorders, anxiety, anorexia nervosa, pain and sleep quality. There's even evidence to suggest the microbiome can boost motivation in exercise.

How can we keep the microbiome healthy?

A healthy microbiome is a diverse microbiome. Dr Karen Scott, a microbiologist at the University of Aberdeen, says diversity helps to maintain a balanced microbiome. "It allows you to degrade all types of food and release the full variety of products, all of which are useful in different ways," she says. One way to feed the good bugs is to eat prebiotics. This is indigestible fibre that reaches the large intestine intact. It acts as a food source for the microbes, which metabolise and ferment the material. The process produces byproducts that are healthy for the gut. The usual suspects – fruit, veg, legumes and grains – are good sources of prebiotic fibre. "If you are eating 30-plus plant foods per week, you are going to be getting enough prebiotics," says Rossi.

> Trillions of microbes, comprising thousands of species of bacteria, fungi, viruses and parasites, live inside the gut

Prebiotics should not be confused with probiotics. Probiotics are live bacteria found in certain yoghurts and other fermented foods, such as kimchi, sauerkraut, kefir and kombucha. These "good" bacteria may help to maintain a healthy, diverse population of gut microbes, but the science is unclear on whether they prevent many health problems. There is some evidence that certain probiotics can ease irritable bowel syndrome, for example, but none that they help with eczema. Frequent reviews of the evidence by the Cochrane collaboration find that many studies are too weak to draw conclusions from, or that probiotics have little or no effect, though they may help prevent common colds and other upper respiratory tract infections. "For someone who is healthy, prebiotics are the way to go, because they feed the bacteria that are already there," says Scott. "Probiotics have had a lot of bad press, with people saying they don't work, but people forget that bacteria are not all the same. You need to use a specific probiotic for a specific purpose. It has to be the right one that has been tried and tested."

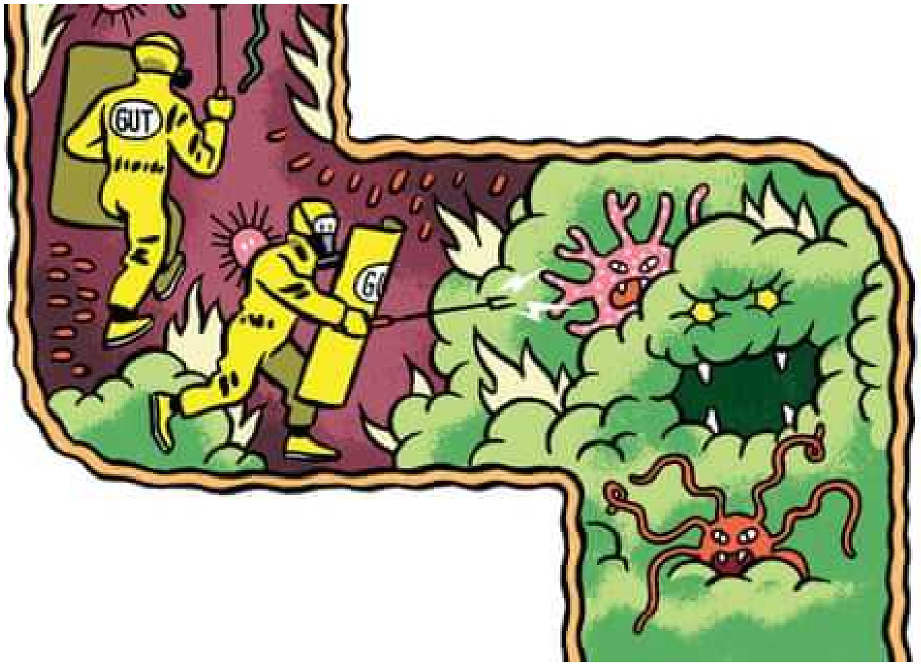


Illustration: Jason Ford

Consuming a lot of fast food, sugar, processed foods and alcohol is bad for the microbiome. In 2021, researchers linked the western diet, rich in processed food and animal-derived products, along with alcohol and sugar, to microbiomes that drive inflammation. Further work has shown that alcohol can disrupt the balance between good and bad bacteria, leading to an overgrowth of harmful microbes that release toxins.

In one remarkable 2015 study, researchers invited African American and rural African volunteers to swap diets for two weeks. The rural Africans, who were used to a diet rich in beans and vegetables, fared worse on the US diet, which was rich in fat and animal protein, but low on dietary fibre. Their metabolism switched to that seen in diabetes and their risk of colon cancer rose. The African Americans did better out of the deal: they had less inflamed colons and their biomarkers for cancer dropped. The only negative was a ramping up of flatulence. The beneficial effect of the rural African diet was attributed to microbes that break down fermentable fibre in the colon to produce butyrate, known for its anti-inflammatory and anti-cancer effects. Prof Jeremy Nicholson, an author on the study at Imperial College London, said it was "startling" how profoundly the microbes, metabolism and cancer risk changed in just two weeks.

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Baddiel offers a ‘slam-dunk argument’ against the existence of God. Photograph: Graeme Robertson/The Guardian

Books

Interview

David Baddiel: ‘Football fills a God-shaped hole’

Sam Leith

Ahead of a new book about our need for faith, the ‘militant atheist’ discusses oversharing, identity – and why he’s distancing himself from Richard Dawkins

Sat 18 Mar 2023 05.00 EDTLast modified on Sat 18 Mar 2023 06.55 EDT

David Baddiel was six years old when his mother told him death was like a long sleep from which you never wake up. “I think from that point,” he says, “I never really wanted to go to sleep again.” That night, he lay on the top bunk of his bed, fervently praying – “probably” the first and last time he has prayed with any sincerity – that “my life as it was in Dollis Hill in 1971 would still somehow continue after death”.

More than half a century later Baddiel is still an insomniac, and he’s still terrified by the prospect of dying. “I don’t quite believe anyone who says they’re not,” he says. That childhood memory, and that conviction, is what kicks off his latest book, The God Desire, which delivers in a brisk 110-odd pages what Baddiel considers “an absolutely slam-dunk argument” against the existence of God.

That sounds hilariously hubristic, but Baddiel very fervently wishes he was wrong. The fact that belief in God is a readymade cure for the fear of death (and the sense of human insignificance, but mostly the fear of death) is the heart of his argument. It’s exactly how badly we want God to exist, he suggests, that makes it a racing certainty we’ve made Him up. God is, so to speak, too good to be true.

Yet it troubles and surprises him that favourite authors including John Updike, whose work he “worships”, and others he considers intellectual peers such as his friend Frank Skinner, a Catholic, could be believers. He describes being astonished at Skinner’s conviction that he would burn in hellfire for living with his girlfriend after his divorce: “I had not recognised,

not in any visceral way, what that *meant* for him. That was my own failing." In some ways the book feels like an attempt to understand the phenomenon as much as to rebut it.

He doesn't spend much time wrestling with Aquinas, Kant, Gödel and co either, dismissing many gnarly points of logical debate as "late-night, sixth-form" dead ends and saying it's "pointless on both sides" to use logic and reason to argue about a being that supposedly transcends them. Did he not feel a bit intimidated, though, by the fact that some of the greatest thinkers in human history have spent entire careers hacking through the weeds on this one?

> Being dismissive of identity is kind of stupid and uncomplex, in terms of understanding what humanity is

"Well, no. I mean, I've read The God Delusion, I've read John Gray's Seven Types of Atheism. When I couldn't sleep, I was listening to a The Rest Is History [podcast hosted by Tom Holland and Dominic Sandbrook] about the Enlightenment, and they were talking about Voltaire being the first atheist who wrote properly about atheism, and I did think: 'Hmm, I haven't really read Voltaire and I've written a book about atheism. That's probably shit … ' But as far as I'm concerned, if it's readable and accessible and makes people intellectually entertained for however long it is, I don't care that much that I clearly haven't read the huge tracts on this elsewhere. But yeah, you're right: there is some chutzpah in it."

Still, there's also humility – because he's not saying human beings have no need for God. In this he differentiates himself from the "Billy big-bollocks" swagger of the noughties new atheists – Sam Harris, Daniel Dennett, Christopher Hitchens and Richard Dawkins – who rejected not only the truth-claims of religion but its consolations. They dismiss as childish the longing for a cosmic parent, but Baddiel writes: "I'm happy to admit to my own babyishness." He'd *love* an omnipotent being to take a personal interest in his life and assure him that he has more to look forward to than a meaningless death and a yawning infinity of extinction. That's where The God Desire connects to his previous book, his sinuously argued and erudite essay on the left's blind spot for antisemitism, Jews Don't Count.

"I did notice that most well-known atheists seem to be not members of a minority," he says. "A lot of ethnic minority experience is associated with religion. In the middle of the book, I try and disentangle what that means. This is partly why my tone towards religion isn't dismissive, like I think Richard Dawkins *is* dismissive, because I *know* it's part of identity. And being dismissive of identity, especially now, is kind of stupid; and also just uncomplex, in terms of understanding what humanity is."



Faith in football … Ian Broudie, Frank Skinner and David Baddiel launch their recording of the Three Lions anthem for the 1998 World Cup. Photograph: PA Images/Alamy

The most moving aspect of the book, then, is the discussion of his own relationship to Judaism. A central concern of Jews Don't Count was to bat away the canard that antisemitism is religious intolerance rather than racism – as he points out, the Gestapo didn't spare Jewish atheists – and in that book he made a point of talking about Jewishness rather than Judaism. His childhood, though, contained the latter as well as the former – to the extent that he was able to write to Tom Stoppard correcting a mistake in Leopoldstadt, his play about 20th-century Jewry and the Holocaust, about why parsley is eaten in the Seder (it's hard to tell whether he's more cock-a-hoop at being friends with Tom Stoppard or at one-upping the great man on Judaica).

Baddiel's parents weren't observant. When it was time for the prayers his dad would say: "Can we get through the olly-wolly-polly and get on with the food?" His mother observed the Seder rituals "not out of a great sense of religion" but as "a family thing". Her parents, who were refugees from the Nazis, used to have Seder nights at the Baddiel home until his father knocked it on the head: "He was pretty curmudgeonly. Eventually, he wouldn't let those grandparents stay at our house: 'They can go and stay at a fucking hotel.' Which is not great of him, given that they had been refugees."

Yet Baddiel and his two brothers were sent to the North West London Jewish Day School "because that was the nearest school that we could go to where we probably wouldn't get beaten up for being Jewish … that meant that I went to a school where I learned Hebrew, I said blessings before every meal, I had to wear religious garb, and I was inculcated in a very Jewish way – which was weird, because I'd come home and they'd make me bacon sandwiches. Although it's messed up, it's a very central building block of my identity." Baddiel wrestles with the question, then, of why as a self-described "militant atheist" he can be so moved by the words of the Kaddish, or find himself sobbing in his seat – even as other theatregoers "collected their coats and programmes" – after the end of Leopoldstadt.

"To explain what you mean by being an atheist Jew is complicated," he says, "and I'm drawn to complexity. The book, I think, to some extent comes from trying to explain what that is." On reading it, he says, Stoppard told him, "I'm really enjoying your conversation with yourself", which is on-brand for Baddiel (and a bit on-brand for the courteous, sphinx-like Stoppard). He's a great one for conversations with, and about, himself. Where "character comedians" hate being themselves on stage, Baddiel never tried to create a gap between his public image and his private one. Baddiel and Skinner Unplanned, he says, was an exercise in "let's see how close as possible we can get to who we actually are on TV".

But, as he observes, a public image always involves a series of misprisions. And in any case he contains multitudes, slaloming cheerfully between highbrow and lowbrow. His early work with Rob Newman set a million teenagers saying "You see that pair of pants? That's you, that is" and his 90s

partnership with Frank Skinner helped bring about the “New Lad”. But he has also written with grace and subtlety about David Foster Wallace and the Roth/Updike generation, created a feature film about a Muslim who discovers he was born Jewish and a play about quantum physics, published comic novels and literary novels and children’s books, done standup shows he sees as halfway to Ted talks, and a documentary about his father’s dementia. Now, wearing his (in his phrase) “Mr Jew mantle”, he appears on heavyweight TV shows and publishes monographs in the TLS.

There is a “thread” connecting these things, he says. “I’ve only ever done things – and this is really true about me – that I am immediately engaged with. I don’t get asked to do that much. It still fucks me off sometimes: I’d quite like for someone to say, ‘Do you want to do this? Do you want a part in this?’ That virtually never happens to me. What happens is, I feel like I really want to talk about this, or I really want to write this joke.

> I felt the need to get up on stage because my mother’s favourite child was my younger brother

“So to go back to why I wrote this book, it’s been me for some time, the belief that God is projection of desire. I feel that desire very strongly, and yet I’m an atheist. How do I make sense of that? That’s as much part of me as thinking it would be funny, wouldn’t it, if two old history professors spoke like I used to at school. They feel both like things that I think in the front of my head quite intensely.” Those front-of-head things come out in the most public way possible.

“I’ll tell you what I think it is, if you wanted a psychological explanation,” he says. “I do come from a sort of lower-middle-class immigrant background. And I think even though I am fine, and I could probably retire, a tiny part of me thinks: ‘No, no, I need to work and I’ve had an idea. And if I don’t do it, someone else will.’”

Does all this work, this frantic covering of the bases, also help stave off the death-fear? “I think it does. Although that leads to an interesting question at my time of life. Writing is hard, and spending all day doing it is hard. I don’t have all that much time left. Should I not be, y’know, travelling the world or

having endless pampering or whatever … before I'm too old or too demented to appreciate it? But there is also the anxiety – a separate anxiety – of 'No, but I still maybe have stuff to say'."

Baddiel sees the "God desire" as manifesting itself in non-religious ways other than work. "Football fills a God-shaped hole, I think. Because it makes you feel connected to something besides yourself. It is, in a small way, eternal. If you've been going to Chelsea, as I have, for 40 years, you think: 'I have watched players come and go and die. And I'm still here. And I feel connected to the *a priori* idea of Chelsea and football, which is sort of beyond the here and now. It's identity, and it's tribalism, and it's opposition to other tribes. It feels very religious."

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Broudie, Baddiel and Skinner reunite for the World Cup in 2022. Photograph: David Levene/The Guardian

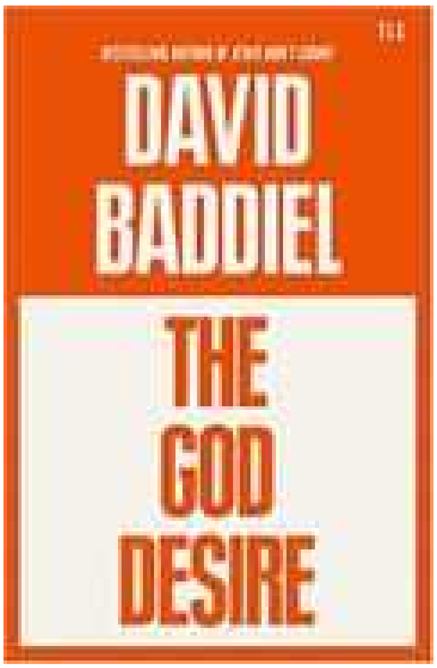
I wonder, too, whether being famous scratches some of the itch for significance that he identifies as a root of the God desire. “It probably does,” he says. “I mean, people want to be famous to be rich, which I’m sure is in there – but I think *more,* people want to be *noticed*. And wanting to be noticed is definitely associated with the God Desire.

“At one point, I talk about God being the ultimate parent figure, because He is both providing and can sort out your life for you but He’s also sometimes angry and whatever. I used to say – and I’ve had a lot of therapy – that if you asked me why I felt the need to get up on stage, it would be because my mother’s favourite child was my younger brother, Dan. I don’t think I’m angry about that at all, but I think somewhere deep in me was a need to say: ‘But me! Over here, me, me! You’re not noticing me!’ That’s a psychoanalytical parental thing, but if you expand it, yeah: God definitely provides a witness. With fame, you feel witnessed.”

Not always witnessed in the way you’d like, though, and that’s perhaps one of the reasons that, for someone as rich and successful and accomplished as he is, Baddiel seems to sit uneasily with himself. Even though he sees how the non-existence of God could give you a carpe diem attitude, he’s

“plagued by anxieties and weaknesses … that stop me Yolo-ing my way through the world”.

As a comedian, Baddiel has specialised in what we now call overshare. It’s all on the surface with him: the ego – he namedrops and mocks himself for namedropping – and its fragility alike. (It seems to me indicative, and endearingly guileless, that the first time we met in person he quoted verbatim from a sniffy review I’d written about one of his novels a decade previously. He mentions it again when we meet for this interview: apparently Stoppard liked the book, so there.)



Social media, to which he has been quite addicted and which both rewards and punishes overshare, has probably exacerbated this. He dedicated one standup show to his trolls, and another to fame itself, where he was funny about constantly being recognised and mistaken for someone else. Also, social media never forgets. After Jews Don’t Count came out, Twitter blew up with 90s footage from Fantasty Football League, the TV show he presented with Skinner, of Baddiel blacking up to mock the footballer Jason Lee. Baddiel acknowledges that that is terrible now and was terrible at the time, and went on Lee’s podcast to apologise in person, but his social media critics don’t see that as the end of it. He says he has “trained himself” not to look when he’s trending on Twitter.

"I don't want to talk deeply about Jason Lee for a very specific reason," he says now. Newspaper interviews with Lee on the day his film went out set social media going again, he says, and "in a way, it was problematic for me because I was very happy to do the interview with Jason and the apology, but I was worried that my film was about antisemitism; and I felt that if the papers and social media decided that the bit with Jason Lee was the main thing about it, what are they doing there? It's suddenly not about Jews and antisemitism any more: it's about another form of racism. Right?"

Since then, "Jason did a Facebook post in which he says he really wants to move on. He feels I've done the apology, that that was useful for both of us, and constructive, and he doesn't want it to be a constant. I feel that too. I will deal with it if I have to. But who is it serving, constantly coming back? If it's not serving Jason Lee, why am I continually being asked about it?"

Another question, not much addressed in the book, is where does he think this "God desire" actually comes from? If it isn't put there by God, is it somehow an adaptive trait?

"I'm just making this up now, but in evolutionary terms, it's possible that without God, we'd all be fucking depressed all the time," he says. "And if we were all fucking depressed all the time, we'd be committing suicide more and … an animal being depressed would allow them to be easily beaten by animals who didn't get depressed. And that's survival of the fittest, right?"

"So once humans get to the point where they realise we're going to die, life is meaningless, it's all shit, they would all be depressed. So we wouldn't exist as a species if we were all depressed. We need something to keep us going."

Very uplifting, I say. Baddiel laughs. And what is there but to laugh in any case? I ask him at one point whether he expects his argument to change any minds.

"*I* think it's absolutely convincing," he says proudly, while admitting that he doesn't expect any true believers to find it all that persuasive. The God

desire, as he sees it, is hardwired and it's strong – and there's simply not much getting round it.

The God Desire by David Baddiel is published on 13 April by TLS (£9.99). To support the Guardian and the Observer, buy a copy at guardianbookshop.com. Delivery charges may apply.

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2023.03.18 - Opinion

- **The Thick of It was fuelled by my anger at the Iraq war – and the way it left truth for dead**
- **Sunak and Hunt have the Tory blind spot: they can’t see how greedy they look to everyone else**
- **Digested week: Hugh Grant plays the prat instead of the dumb Oscars game**
- **GPT-4 has brought a storm of hype and fright – is it marketing froth, or is this a revolution?**



Rebecca Front, James Smith, Joanna Scanlan and Chris Addison in The Thick of It (2009), written and directed by Armando Iannucci. Photograph: Phil Volkers/BBC

The Iraq invasion: 20 years onPolitics

The Thick of It was fuelled by my anger at the Iraq war – and the way it left truth for dead

Armando Iannucci



Tony Blair’s terrible decision inspired my tale of stupidity in the corridors of power – with a howl of frustration among the one-liners

Sat 18 Mar 2023 03.00 EDTLast modified on Sat 18 Mar 2023 09.47 EDT

Shortly before George W Bush and Tony Blair launched their war, the Arab League issued a statement declaring that invading Iraq would “open the gates of hell”. Of all the pieces of intelligence that the CIA and British agents were gathering at the time, this turned out to be the only accurate one.

The invasion was launched on “evidence” about weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) that consisted mostly of whatever it was Iraqi informants knew our intelligence agencies most wanted to hear and would happily pay for. The biggest contributor to this self-fulfilling dossier was an alcohol-fixated defector called Curveball, who later admitted his improvisations about chemical weapons weren’t true.

No premise was too flimsy to get thrown on to the pile of spurious evidence. And before we knew it, that pile was big enough to justify sending our troops off into harm’s way. Many who made it home were broken for ever.

At the time, I was numb with confusion and horror that the British democratic system could allow a prime minister, fixated on a threat people were telling him wasn't there, to get his party and his opponents to back a war with no purpose, no target, no endgame and no rationale. We all told Blair at the time it wasn't going to end well. Now here we are, 20 years later, and only half right: it did go as badly as predicted, but it hasn't really ended. The war's hellish reverberations are still being heard: on top of the human suffering, the rise of militancy, the collapse of markets and economies, the mistrust of the west and the transformation of Tony Blair into a haunted husk. One of the biggest casualties has been truth, which the war swiftly dragged out into the desert and left for dead. Post Iraq 2003, we simply don't trust what our leaders tell us.



Peter Capaldi plays Malcolm Tucker in The Thick of It spin-off film In the Loop (2009). Photograph: Bbc Films/Sportsphoto/Allstar

How could this happen? My way of processing it all, and to try and attempt some sort of answer to that question, was to make The Thick of It. I wanted to know what exactly goes on behind those closed doors in Downing St and Whitehall ministries. How do some massively stupid decisions get made? The show wasn't about Iraq: I wanted to cover the groupthink and moments of dysfunction that impact on government every day. I wanted to explain how the system gets us into those positions. But if The Thick of It wasn't

about the war, it was fuelled by my anger at it. If, among the comic one-liners and farcical plotlines, you hear a constant howl of rage and frustration in the background, that's me. And I wanted you to hear it.

By getting close-up to the dysfunction of power, my own set of creative priorities changed. I became less interested in the political personalities appearing on our screens, and more interested in analysing what they were saying. I wanted to catch them using language to distort meaning, or to distract us from a larger but less appealing reality. This was spurred by something Blair said in a speech to his party conference on 28 September, a year after the war. Seeking to justify the invasion, even though it had become clear the raison d'etre for the war, Saddam's WMDs, didn't exist, Blair said: "I know this issue has divided the country … I'm like any other human being – fallible … I only know what I believe."

It feels real, an appeal to the heart, an offer of vulnerability, but that phrase "I only know what I believe" is a false friend: it sounds casual but actually subverts the tradition of empirical inquiry we've been successfully using since Aristotle. Normally, if we have a hunch, we test it. If we're looking for an explanation, we eliminate every available solution or possibility until we find the right one. On a day-to-day basis, to survive, we first believe what we know.

Blair's "I only know what I believe" is an unsuspecting admission that, for him, decisions are made primarily from gut feeling and a pool of emotions rather than from objective reasoning. This is perhaps understandable if you're an arts minister and you want to guarantee some funding to a pet project, but it's inexcusable when deciding whether to send men and women to their deaths.

But it happened nonetheless, and we let it happen. And now, is it any wonder the past few decades have been defined by a politics that appeals more to our emotions than to any evidence of our senses? More and more candidates are chosen, and more and more leaders are picked, on the basis of belief rather than ability. More and more debates are neutralised into take-it-or-leave-it mantras that aren't open to question: get Brexit done, the anti-growth coalition, stop the boats. This is a new emotional realm, where, in

the words of Michael Gove: “The people of this country have had enough of experts.”

Anyone who rails against this, who shows one iota of an appetite for facts and evidence, is lumped into catch-all categories of opponents: the metropolitan elite, the wokerati, the enemy within. This last one points menacingly at where we are now, 20 years later; in a land where criticism of the government in power is rebadged as treachery. Such are the booby traps that lie hidden in political discourse today; a landscape more littered than ever before with danger and lies.

- Armando Iannucci is a film and TV writer whose credits include The Thick of It, In the Loop and Veep
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Jeremy Hunt on This Morning with Phillip Schofield and Holly Willoughby, 16 March 2023. Photograph: Ken McKay/ITV/Rex/Shutterstock

OpinionBudget 2023

Sunak and Hunt have the Tory blind spot: they can't see how greedy they look to everyone else

Gaby Hinsliff



Even in a budget that sought to rehabilitate the party in the eyes of ordinary people, they couldn't resist making the rich richer

Fri 17 Mar 2023 13.21 EDTLast modified on Fri 17 Mar 2023 17.44 EDT

Something old, something new. Something borrowed, and something for "red wall" voters deserting the Conservatives en masse.

Like a penitent spouse trying to renew some decidedly tattered wedding vows, Jeremy Hunt this week delivered a budget dressed up as a plea for forgiveness. This government is desperate to present itself at the electoral altar next year as a virgin administration, its wild fling with Liz Truss conveniently forgotten. Something old? That would be the return of basic competence, and a government that doesn't leave wine stains on the walls or wipe billions off the stock market by accident.

His new idea was a fresh start on welfare, scrapping the hated work capability assessment and promising more help for people to get jobs (although with even tougher sanctions if they don't). Free childcare hours for the under-threes was the borrowed element, swiped from a Labour party that will (if it wins the next election) now have to stump up the extra money

to make a wildly underfunded policy actually work, without necessarily getting the glory for it. And for hard-pressed red wall voters, there was more help with energy bills plus something vaguely Brexity-sounding about lowering duty on beer in pubs. This was a carefully calibrated budget from a Conservative party that is clearly now back in contention politically, if a long way from being back in the lead, and leaves no room for Labour complacency. But it also revealed that leopards don't change their blind spots. Rishi Sunak's government suffers from the same fatal weakness that Liz Truss revealed by scrapping the 45p tax rate, and that's failing to realise how bailing out the very wealthy looks to everyone else.

The big surprise of the budget was the chancellor removing the lifetime cap on tax-free pension savings, to stop NHS consultants retiring early on the grounds that their retirement savings are now so enormous that they're attracting crippling tax bills. (Currently, anyone lucky enough to have £1m stashed away in their pension pot – about 10 times the median pension savings for 55- to 64-year-olds – can't stuff in any more without attracting tax penalties, which, combined with general post-pandemic exhaustion, has evidently convinced some doctors to hang up their stethoscopes). Except the beneficiaries won't just be doctors, because apparently that would have been too complicated; so anyone earning up to £240,000 a year and lucky enough to have a big pension pot stands to benefit, suggesting an unexpected tax break for some City types, the upper reaches of the tech industry and other highly paid professionals. Not only can they now build an even bigger nest egg for their own old age, some may even be able to hand it down to their children. Pension pots are usually passed on free of inheritance tax, although in most cases the heir would pay income tax on what they draw down, and the bigger the pot the more likely the owner won't spend it all before they die.

All this may seem perfectly reasonable if you move in circles where everyone has seven-figure retirement funds – maybe you're a former Goldman Sachs banker married to an heiress, for example – but rather less so to a care worker wondering why nobody's earmarked £800m a year to stop them and their colleagues leaving for better-paid jobs at Aldi. Was there really no other way of solving a pension problem specific to senior doctors without creating what the Institute for Fiscal Studies and the Resolution

Foundation thinktank both argue is an inheritance tax loophole ripe for exploitation?

Inherited money is already one of the few things propping up an insane housing market in London and the south-east. By 2025, it's estimated that about £100bn a year will be passing down from an ageing baby-boomer generation to their children in what's been dubbed the "great wealth transfer", comprising both legacies and so-called "lifetime gifts" handed over while the donor is still alive. By 2047, that figure could have more than trebled. For the lucky ones it will be life-changing, but it risks creating deep divides between those who are in line for inheritances and those who aren't. The last thing Britain needs, in other words, is new ways of keeping wealth within the family.

Freezing inheritance tax thresholds, as successive chancellors including Hunt have done for more than a decade, has, in fairness, skimmed some useful extra billions off this wave of inheritance. But imagine how much more could be achieved with a radical rethink of wealth tax – perhaps with proceeds ringfenced to build houses for those who can't borrow a deposit from the bank of Mum and Dad, which was the big idea glaringly absent from this budget.

The Conservative party's capacity to regenerate itself should never be underestimated. Sunak's government has identified its biggest weaknesses, is tackling them methodically, and clearly isn't going down without a fight. But every political party has its blind spots and vested interests, and problems it knows it should solve but can't for fear of upsetting its base. The longer a party is in power, the more these start to pile up, until eventually the country starts to feel stuck and voters conclude it's time to let the other lot have a go at shifting the logjam. "Time for a change" is the slogan all incumbents rightly fear. Perhaps doctors aren't the only ones heading for an early retirement.

- Gaby Hinsliff is a Guardian columnist

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‘I don’t care who she is, no kit, no participation.’ Photograph: WPA/Getty Images

Digested weekOscars 2023

Digested week: Hugh Grant plays the prat instead of the dumb Oscars game

Emma Brockes



Meanwhile Dawn French masters the art of a great show title, and are we all over-hydrated?

Fri 17 Mar 2023 19.27 EDTLast modified on Fri 17 Mar 2023 19.38 EDT

Monday

With American banks teetering on the edge, 10,000 layoffs at Facebook and the global economy fighting another doom spiral, we turn our attention, naturally, to comments made by Hugh Grant on the red carpet at the Oscars. Sunday's ceremony, which was watched by more people than last year but still fewer than can fit into a mid-size Scandinavian country, delivered a solid piece of pre-show drama when the 62-year-old British actor ran into Ashley Graham, the model turned TV-host, who invited him to share in his joy at being there.

I have always had a soft spot for Grant, who specialises in the kind of hang-dog contrition commonly seen in children appealing for clemency before you know what they've done. In his latest public appearance, Grant was on chillier form, as he sought to communicate to viewers, via a series of abrupt

answers, his disdain for red carpet interviews in general and Graham in particular. The question for the American press on Monday morning, as articulated by the Washington Post, was Is Hugh Grant Rude or Just British?

I think we can say with some confidence that Grant's I-don't-understand-the-question deadpan and drive-by reference to Thackeray was a case of laughing at Graham, not with her. (Graham, leaning gamely into the headwind, ploughed on.) Of course he was being a prat, and of course these events are appalling, and of course the red carpet interviews are dumb. What might Grant like to have been asked about? His thoughts on Ukraine, perhaps; or his sense of where the banking crisis may lead. Oh, look; now I'm being a prat, too.

Most sensible people, I suspect, would agree that if you are inclined to play the game to the extent of showing up at an event to present an award, you have to dig deep and be gracious throughout. Graham, meanwhile, staying as ruthlessly on brand as her interviewee, later told TMZ that, as her mother always taught her, you gotta get out there and "kill them with kindness", and that – naturally – she had "had so much fun".



'Oh, the whole of humanity is here. It's Vanity Fair.' Photograph: Christopher Furlong/Getty Images

Tuesday

More adventures in showbiz this week via the reliably excellent Dawn French, whose live show, Dawn French is a Huge Twat, has been causing headaches for the advertising watchdog after an ad featuring that title appeared in the Sunday Times and – checks notes – two people complained. Job done from the point of view of French's publicists, but it leads one to consider other titles that do-more-heavy-lifting-than-the-product-itself.

Sean Penn, with his 2018 novel Bob Honey Who Just Do Stuff, is a strong performer in this area, as is Russell Brand and his Booky Wook – although unlike French, neither of these has the advantage of being funny. Pride and Prejudice and Zombies was a smart solicitation for eye-balls. So was Another Bullshit Night in Suck City by Nick Flynn. It's hard to credit it, now, but the Vagina Monologues by V, formerly Eve Ensler, was every bit as arresting as the French title when the play first opened in 1996. Ultimately nothing will beat the name of TVGoHome's satirical fly-on-wall documentary about Nathan Barley, which those too young to remember can look up, or work out for themselves since it's the final, unpublishable word on the vagina/twat synonyms continuum.

Wednesday

The clocks went forward in New York this week, briefly narrowing the time difference with GMT to four hours and bringing on what might be called micro-jetlag (no one in my house can get up). Pity the high school students of some schools in Indonesia, therefore, who, after the Indonesian authorities launched a pilot scheme to start school in East Nusa Tenggara province at 5.30am, are being forced to get up at 4am before plunging out into the dark. According to the governor, this measure is designed to strengthen children's discipline, at the cost of ruining the lives of the whole family. I long for an experiment in the other direction, in which school starts at 10am and we manage for a single, miraculous day to arrive on time.

Thursday

Do you carry a water bottle to work? Do you send your kid with one to school? The obsession with hydration is decades deep, but still too shallow to reach back to my school days. I sometimes freak my children out by telling them entire days would go by when I didn't drink water and no one thought anything of it. By contrast these people are constantly chugging and running off to the loo.

As it turns out, what an Australian psychologist has termed "emotional support water bottles" might not represent the straightforward advance in human wellness we assume. Associate Prof Keong Yap of the Australian Catholic University made his comments about bottles-as-security-blankets to the New York Post [in response](#) to a recent US study that found reusable water bottles can contain 40,000 times more germs than the average toilet seat and twice as many as the kitchen sink. More-germs-than-the-toilet is a hardy PR formulation and it should be noted that the study was funded by a water filter company. Still, I'm looking at the giant water bottle on my desk and suppressing a mild urge to heave. Apparently, you are supposed to wash these things every day? With hot, soapy water? And not just run them briskly under the cold tap now and then?

Friday

One of my favourite types of TV clip, after people falling over or news hosts mispronouncing "Jeremy Hunt", is a good find on Antiques Roadshow. This week the BBC show was at Belmont House in Faversham, Kent, where a guest [stepped forward](#) to present a painting – a beautiful, abstract scene in grey-greens – that had been in his family for a long time. The man, who wasn't named, said he suspected it might be by a famous artist, whereupon Rupert Mass, the expert on hand, informed him it was by David Hockney and worth in the region of £20,000-£30,000. Suppressing large emotions, the man said mildly, "thank you for that information. Thank you very much" – a moment of exemplary Britishness that quite made up for Hugh Grant.

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‘It is too late to put this technology back in the box.’ Photograph: Jaap Arriens/NurPhoto/Rex/Shutterstock

OpinionChatGPT

GPT-4 has brought a storm of hype and fright – is it marketing froth, or is this a revolution?

Charlie Beckett

I have seen enough to know that it’s going to alter our lives. Just think what AI tools could do when used by creative people in fashion or architecture

Fri 17 Mar 2023 10.39 EDTLast modified on Fri 17 Mar 2023 16.20 EDT



The recent flurry, or rather blizzard, of announcements of new variants of generative AI have brought a storm of hype and fright. OpenAI's ChatGPT already appeared to be a gamechanger, but now this week's new version, GPT-4, is another leap ahead. GPT-4 can generate enough text to write a book, code in every computer language, and – most remarkably – "understand" images.

If your mind is not boggled by the potential of this, then you haven't been paying attention. I have spent the past five years researching how artificial intelligence has been changing journalism around the world. I've seen how it can supercharge news media to gather, create and distribute content in much more efficient and effective ways. It is already the "next wave" of technological change. Now generative AI has moved potential progress up a gear or two.

But hang on. This is not a breakthrough to "sentient" AI. The robots are not coming to replace us. However, these large language models (LLMs) – such as ChatGPT – are an accelerant that operate at such scale and speed that they can appear to do whatever you prompt them to do. And the more that we use

them and feed them data and questions, the faster they learn to predict outcomes.

A million startups are already claiming to use this secret sauce to create new products that will revolutionise everything from legal administration to share dealing, gaming to medical diagnosis. A lot of this is marketing froth. As with all tech breakthroughs, there is always a hype cycle and unexpected good and bad consequences. But I have seen enough to know that it's going to alter our lives. Just think what these tools could do when used by creative people in fashion or architecture, for example.

Artificial intelligence such as machine-learning, automation or natural language processing is already part of our world. For example, when you search online you are using machine-learning-driven algorithms trained on vast datasets to give you what you are looking for. Now the pace of change is picking up. In 2021 alone, global private corporate investment in AI doubled, and I expect the generative AI breakthroughs to double that again.

Now take a breath. I don't recommend that anyone uses ChatGPT or GPT-4 to create anything right now – at least not something that will be used without a human checking to make sure that it is accurate, reliable and efficient, and does no harm. AI is not about the total automation of content production from start to finish: it is about augmentation to give professionals and creatives the tools to work faster, freeing them up to spend more time on what humans do best.

We know that there are some real extra risks in using generative AI. It has "hallucinations" where it makes things up. It sometimes creates harmful content. And it will certainly be used to spread disinformation or to invade privacy. People have already used it to create new ways to hack computers, for example. You might want to use it to create a wonderful new video game, but what if some arch-villain uses it to create a deadly virus?

We know about those risks because we can see its flaws when we try out these prototypes that the technology companies have made publicly available. You can have a lot of fun getting it to write poems or songs or create surreal images. Ask it a straight question, and you usually get a sensible safe answer. Ask it a stupid or complex question, and it will

struggle. A lot of tech experts and journalists have had fun testing it to destruction and making it respond in bizarre and disturbing ways. The AI boffins will be delighted because this all helps refine their programming. They are conducting their experimentation partly in public.

We also know about the risks because OpenAI itself has listed them on its “system card” that explains the new powers and dangers of this tech, and how it has sought to ameliorate them with each new iteration. Who decides in the end what risks are acceptable or what we should do about them is a moot question.

It is too late to put this technology “back in the box”. It has too much potential for helping humans meet the global challenges we face. It is vital that we have an open debate about the ethical, economic, political and social impact of all forms of AI. I hope that our politicians educate themselves rapidly about this fast-emerging technology better than they have in the past, and that we all become more AI-literate. But ultimately, my main hope is that we take the time and effort to think carefully about the best ways that it can be used positively. You don’t have to believe the hype to have some hope.

- Charlie Beckett is a professor in the Media and Communications Department at the LSE. He is director of Polis, the LSE’s journalism thinktank and leader of the LSE Journalism and AI project.

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2023.03.18 - Around the world

- **Pakistan Police enter Imran Khan’s home as he appears in court, party says**
- **US Police stopped a couple in Tennessee. Then they took their children away**
- **The women forced out of Iran ‘Every act of resistance is a spark of hope’**
- **Golf clubs and a $24K dagger Trump failed to report dozens of foreign gifts**
- **The crowd goes wild FC Barcelona reveals Camp Nou stadium’s animal inhabitants**

Pakistani police arrest supporters of Imran Khan after raid on his Lahore home – video report

Imran Khan

Court cancels Imran Khan's arrest warrant after clashes in Pakistan capital

Supporters of ex-prime minister and police fight outside court where he was addressing charges of unlawfully selling state gifts

Shah Meer Baloch in Islamabad
Sat 18 Mar 2023 13.57 EDTFirst published on Sat 18 Mar 2023 05.35 EDT

A court in Islamabad has cancelled Imran Khan's arrest warrant after intense clashes between police and the former prime minister's supporters outside the judicial complex.

Khan officially appeared before the court in Pakistan's capital on Saturday, complying with a judicial order that led to a failed attempt to arrest him on Tuesday. He is facing various legal challenges including unlawfully selling state gifts given to him by foreign dignitaries while in office from 2018 to 2022. Khan says he followed legal procedures in acquiring the gifts.

There were clashes outside the court between police and Khan's supporters. The Islamabad police alleged that Khan's supporters shelled the judicial complex and set fire to a police post.

The local media reported that inside the courtroom people and judges faced difficulties due to the effects of the teargas used by the police.

The judge said during the hearing: "But what should we do if the situation is like this?" The judge allowed Khan to leave after recording his attendance.

Earlier on Saturday, Khan and his close aides accused Punjab police of entering his house after Khan left for court.

The move followed days of standoff and clashes between police and his supporters around the property.

Fawad Chaudhry, a former information minister and Khan's close aide, said the police entry into Khan's residence was in complete violation of the court's order. After the raid on Khan's house, the inspector general of police addressed the media and said that they had recovered ammunition and petrol bombs from Khan's residence in Lahore.

Pakistan's electronic media regulatory authority banned television coverage of Khan's appearance in the judicial complex and political rallies and there was a blackout of mobile internet services in Islamabad.

The court cases against Khan started after he was ousted from office in a constitutional vote of no confidence. Since then he has held protest rallies across the country to demand a snap election. During one rally in November he was shot and wounded.

Pakistan's prime minister, Shehbaz Sharif, has rejected Khan's demands and said that the election would take place on time.

However, Khan has also dissolved two provincial assemblies where his party Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf has been in power. The supreme court has directed the government to make arrangements for elections that the government has been avoiding.

Michael Kugelman, a director at the South Asia Institute at the Wilson Center, said: "We are seeing a rapidly intensifying confrontation between Khan and the state that turned on him.

"There are possible off-ramps – dialogue between the two sides, a formal announcement of an election date – but the political environment appears too charged to allow for de-escalation. Eventually, something has to give, and it may not be pretty," Kugelman said.

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A couple were stopped by police outside Nashville, Tennessee, for minor citations, but the ordeal tore their family apart. Photograph: Mark Humphrey/AP

Tennessee

Police stopped a Black couple in Tennessee – and took their children

Bianca Clayborne and Deonte Williams' case fits pattern of child welfare services fueling disparities in who gets to remain a family

Edwin Rios
@edwin_d_rios
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Nearly a month ago, Bianca Clayborne, Deonte Williams, and their five children were on their way from Georgia to Chicago for Clayborne's uncle's funeral when a highway patrol officer stopped them in Manchester, Tennessee.

That moment – about 60 miles outside Nashville – has since upended their lives as Clayborne and Williams try to regain custody of their children after they say state authorities "kidnapped" them on account of a minuscule amount of marijuana in the car, the Tennessee Lookout first reported.

The separation described by Clayborne and Williams fits into a historical pattern of US child welfare services dividing poor, Black and Indigenous families in particular on the grounds of alleged neglect and abuse, fueling disparities in who gets to remain a family and who doesn't.

"I just have to believe if my clients looked different or had a different background, they would have just been given a citation and told you just keep this stuff away from the kids while you're in this state and they'd be on their way," said Jamaal Boykin, one of the family's attorneys, according to the Tennessee Lookout.

In her damning book, Torn Apart: How the Child Welfare System Destroys Black Families – and How Abolition Can Build a Safer World, University of Pennsylvania law professor Dorothy E Roberts described how the US child welfare system historically punished families – especially Black ones – for living through poverty as they face accusations of neglect or being unable to meet children's housing, healthcare and other basic needs.

Roberts argues that racist stereotyping influences the way child welfare workers and policymakers approach the investigations of families of color, finding that one in 10 Black children are forcibly removed from their families and put into foster care by the time they are adults. She wrote in an excerpt that more than half of US Black children would face some form of a child welfare investigation by the time they are 18 while fewer than a third of white children would.

In Clayborne and Williams's case, the trooper stopped their car on 17 February for having dark tinted windows and driving in the left lane without actively passing, according to citations reviewed by the Lookout. The officer searched their car and found five grams of marijuana, a misdemeanor

offense. He arrested Williams and took him to a local jail. Clayborne followed, as her kids cried.

While Clayborne waited for Williams's release on bond, an officer restrained her while state officials took custody of her five children, including her four-month-old baby. Courtney Teasley, an attorney representing the family since late February, said that Clayborne and Williams's case reflected "how government systems that say they are there to protect have the ability to use those same protections to oppress".

Saying Tennessee's children's services department was "abysmal," Teasley said her clients' children now face being removed from Georgia "to some school that they know nothing about".

"We already know that … [most] children being hurt are the Black children," Teasley added. "Shining a light on this [shows] what's being done to Black people in real time. That leads to mass incarceration and everything that comes with it: generational trauma, the school-to-prison pipeline."

> "I want people to know what they're doing to Black people in these small towns behind closed doors," said @courtneyteasley, after @TN_DCS filed to prosecute her and a Black family for talking to the Tennessee Lookout.https://t.co/TDzySzG8i8
>
> — Tennessee Lookout (@TNLookout) March 17, 2023

The state's children's services department ultimately alleged that Clayborne and Williams's children were being abused to obtain an emergency order to take them away. The removal went through though court records showed a state case worker brought in after the stop "discovered only the father had been arrested", the Lookout reported. Still, that same day, the agency received a court order to take the children away from Clayborne and Williams.

Nearly a week later, during their first juvenile court hearing, the couple was asked to take drug tests, which showed mixed results.

Urine drug tests came back positive for Williams but negative for Clayborne. Follow-up, rapid hair follicle tests were then ordered, coming back positive for fentanyl and oxycodone for both. Both deny taking those substances, and a local treatment court administrator told the Lookout that such tests are generally inadmissible as evidence.

Teasley said it is "egregious" for someone's children to be taken on the basis of an inadmissible test. "How many people have had this happen to them?" she said.

Tennessee Democratic lawmakers called for the return of the couple's children. State senator London Lamar told reporters on Friday the state's action was "ridiculous" and an "overuse of power", describing it "borderline discrimination".

> Senator London Lamar (@Senator Lamar) demanded that @TN_DCS return the 5 children of Bianca Clayborne and Deonte Williams immediately after "overuse of power in this state to deprive a family of having their children." pic.twitter.com/nsUqDCo6eE
>
> — MLK50: Justice Through Journalism (@MLK50Memphis) March 17, 2023

State senator Raumesh Akbari said on Friday that state officials "exercised extreme and flawed judgment in taking their children and it seems they've doubled down on this poor decision".

In an interview with the Lookout, Clayborne said she couldn't believe when officers surrounded her for six hours and stopped her from reaching for her nursing baby. She recalled one of them said: "Don't touch him. He's getting taken away from you.'"

"I breastfeed – they didn't give me anything," Clayborne said. "They just ran off with my kids."

Teasley says that the couple has driven back and forth from their home in Georgia to see their children in Nashville, where they are with a foster family. Clayborne has struggled with the aftereffects of being unable to

nurse her baby and wound up in the hospital as she suffered from panic attacks.

“They are on the road all the time now [to] see the kids and stay with them as long as they can,” Teasley said, adding that the children sob whenever their parents leave. “It’s escalated, because it’s seeming like they’re never going to get their kids back.”

Meanwhile, “the kids … know nothing except ‘I want to go home’,” Teasley said.

A hearing on the case is scheduled for Monday.

Teasley added that she has risked facing reprisals just for speaking to the media about the case. On Friday, she said that the attorney for Tennessee’s children’s services department had filed a motion “for sanctions and referral for prosecution” against her. The motion argues that Teasley violated confidentiality provisions, which she denies.

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The women forced out of Iran: ‘Every act of resistance is a spark of hope’

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A set of golf clubs from the prime minister of Japan are among the gifts given to Donald Trump's White House that remain unaccounted for. Photograph: Michele Eve Sandberg/REX/Shutterstock

Donald Trump

Golf clubs and a $24K dagger: Trump failed to report dozens of foreign gifts

Several items given to the former president, including a life-size painting of him given by El Salvador, are still unaccounted for

Guardian staff and agencies
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Donald Trump's White House failed to report more than 100 gifts from foreign nations worth more than a quarter-million dollars, according to a US government report, and several of those gifts – including a lifesize painting of Trump given by the president of El Salvador and golf clubs from the prime minister of Japan – are still unaccounted for.

The revelations came as part of a report on Friday from Democrats on the House Oversight Committee. The report details numerous unreported items, among them 16 gifts from Saudi Arabia worth more than $45,000 in all, including a dagger valued at up to $24,000, and 17 presents from India that include expensive cufflinks, a vase and a $4,600 model of the Taj Mahal.

The Foreign Gifts and Decorations Act requires that gifts above $480 given to the president, vice-president and their families by foreign officials must be reported to the state department. The report from House Democrats, citing state department records, says the number of gifts reported by Trump and his family are lower than the number disclosed by previous presidents.

The top Democrat on the committee, congressman Jamie Raskin, said the findings indicate "a brazen disregard for the rule of law and its systematic mishandling of large gifts".

All told, the report says, though the White House did report some gifts to the state department between 2017 and 2019, it failed to report more than 100 foreign gifts with a total value of over $250,000.

The report says federal officials have not been able to locate a lifesize painting of Trump that, according to internal White House correspondence, was commissioned by the president of El Salvador and delivered to the US embassy in El Salvador as a gift to Trump just before the 2020 election. According to the report, the US ambassador to El Salvador alerted US officials about the gift and requested help in shipping it.

The report says there are "no records of the painting's disposition" by the National Archives and Records Administration or the General Services Administration, but that some records suggest it may have been moved to Florida in July 2021 as property of Trump's.

Thousands of dollars in golf clubs given to Trump in 2018 and 2019 by Shinzo Abe, then the prime minister of Japan, are also unaccounted for.

The report is the result of a year-long investigation into Trump's failure to disclose foreign gifts while in office, according to the Washington Post, and

runs 15 pages long.

“Today’s preliminary findings suggest again the Trump administration’s brazen disregard for the rule of law and its systematic mishandling of large gifts from foreign governments, including many lavish personalized gifts that vastly exceed the statutory limit in value but were never reported – some that are still missing today,” said Raskin in a statement.

He also said that the committee would “remain committed to following the facts to determine the extent to which former President Trump broke the law or violated the constitution when he failed to report gifts and took possession of valuable items without paying the fair market price for them.”

Steven Cheung, a spokesperson for Trump, issued a statement claiming that “many items were received either before or after the administration”, the Post reported.

The Associated Press contributed reporting

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Fútboll crazy: a chaffinch in the stands at the Camp Nou stadium in Barcelona. Photograph: FC Barcelona

The age of extinctionGlobal development

The crowd goes wild: FC Barcelona reveals Camp Nou stadium's animal

inhabitants

Swifts, swallows, bats and geckos all enjoy a 'coexistence of mutual respect' on the football stands, wildlife census shows

The age of extinction is supported by

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About this content

Stephen Burgen in Barcelona

Sat 18 Mar 2023 05.00 EDTLast modified on Sat 18 Mar 2023 15.10 EDT

In the silence after the final whistle you can hear the blackbirds sing, or perhaps a chaffinch or a Sardinian warbler. Or, if night has already fallen, you may see the bats swoop low over the centre circle as the fans shuffle towards the exits. This is the Spotify Camp Nou, the home of Barcelona football club … but also of myriad creatures.

Barcelona is probably the first major football club in the world to produce a guide to its stadium's wildlife, after carrying out a census of its animal occupants. The guide is part of the club rethinking its role in the community and its environmental impact, says Jordi Portabella, an environmentalist and former candidate for mayor of the city, now in charge of developing the club's sustainability policy.

Portabella explains that a wildlife census was needed before the football season ends in May, when work will begin on remodelling the stadium. This will entail demolishing the entire upper stand to increase capacity from 99,354 to 105,000 spectators, work that will affect the many birds that nest there, as well as the colony of bats.

They are taking measures to protect the nests as best they can, says Portabella, and to establish new nesting areas to ensure the birds return when work is complete. Migratory species such as swallows and martins have been nesting on the exterior or inside the roof of the stadium since it was built in 1957.

> There's an historical coexistence based on mutual respect. Up in the stands, we're used to having bats flying around us

Jordi Portabella, environmentalist

"There's an historical coexistence based on mutual respect," says Portabella. "It's as though the humans and the animals have come to a tacit agreement. For example, up in the stands we're used to having bats flying around us during a match."

The bats have made their home close to the *tribuna*, the seats reserved for the club president and the crème de la crème of Catalan society.

The census was carried out by a specialist company that says the site is like an oval cliff face surrounded by trees, providing a habitat for cliff-dwelling and woodland species. Thirty-four species were counted, 31 of them birds, along with two reptiles and one mammal – the bats.

The club says that scrupulous hygiene measures ensure there are no rats. Squirrels have made the odd cameo during matches but are not resident.


Prime perch: a magpie on the goalpost at the Camp Nou stadium. Photograph: Reuters, Alamy

Among the birds, researchers found two species of swift, two martins, two types of swallow and three varieties of tit. There are also three species of parakeet, none native; they are descended from escaped pets and are now widely seen in city parks throughout Spain.

As well as urban regulars such as pigeons, gulls, starlings and magpies, the team encountered collared doves, three species of finch, pied flycatchers, firecrests, Sardinian warblers and white wagtails.

A pair of kestrels have bred in the stadium and peregrine falcons, nesting in a nearby university building, hunt around the ground. The falcons are one of only seven pairs in the city. The birds were reintroduced in Barcelona a few years ago after being driven to extinction at the end of the last century.

The two reptiles discovered are a gecko and a common wall lizard of the sort you would find on any balcony in the city in summer.

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Stadiums are unique in the urban landscape, occupying large areas in the city centre, inactive for most of the week, then interrupted by a surge of activity over a few hours when tens of thousands of fans converge, consuming large quantities of food, drink and electricity, briefly saturating public transport and the surrounding public space.

Portabella says the club is very conscious of its environmental impact and envisages what he calls the "Barça space", converting the surrounding area, much of it a bleak concrete heat-sink in summer, into something more like a large city square, softened with trees and green spaces.

"Barça wants to be part of the solution to the problem of climate change, not part of the problem," he says, adding that everything from electricity generation, water consumption and waste production is being analysed in order to minimise environmental impact.

While few of Europe's big clubs have fully embraced environmental change, Barça could look to the semi-professional English club Dartford FC in Kent for inspiration. A model of environmental consciousness, the roof over the stand at its Princes Park stadium (capacity 4,100) is covered in vegetation to improve insulation, electricity comes from solar panels and rainwater is collected to water the pitch, which is laid below ground level to reduce light and noise pollution.

Meanwhile, Barça has added wildlife to its boast of being “more than a club”. However, as football coaches never tire of repeating, what matters is what happens on the pitch. The rest is for the birds.

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Headlines

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- **HSBC Bank to buy Silicon Valley Bank UK for £1 in rescue deal**
- **US Regulators guarantee all deposits after SVB collapse, as Biden promises action**
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Silicon Valley Bank's failure raised fears of contagion across the banking sector. Photograph: Jaap Arriens/NurPhoto/Rex/Shutterstock

HSBC

HSBC to buy Silicon Valley Bank UK for £1 in rescue deal

Takeover arranged by government is likely to save British startups from big losses after US bank's collapse

- Live coverage of Silicon Valley Bank collapse
- Why did it collapse and is this the start of a banking crisis?
- Nils Pratley: relief in the UK over SVB. Panic in the US

Kalyeena Makortoff Banking correspondent
@kalyeena
Mon 13 Mar 2023 05.06 EDTFirst published on Mon 13 Mar 2023 03.07 EDT

The UK government has struck a last-minute deal for HSBC to buy Silicon Valley Bank's UK operations, saving thousands of British tech startups and investors from big losses after the biggest bank failure since 2008.

The takeover will override the Bank of England's initial decision to place SVB UK into insolvency, after a run on the lender that was originally sparked by fears over a multibillion-pound shortfall on the US parent company's balance sheet. The US bank was closed and its assets seized by authorities on Friday.

While US regulators also revealed a rescue package to save American customers' deposits in full, and provide fresh liquidity to the banking sector, investor fears had not been calmed. Those jitters dragged down global bank stocks and sent the FTSE 100 down more than 2% on Monday. HSBC's shares fell 4%.

The acquisition – which cost HSBC £1 – followed overnight talks between Downing Street, the Bank of England and HSBC bosses including the chief executive, Noel Quinn, as authorities rushed to protect the finances of SVB UK's 3,500 customers. Those customers included venture capital investors and hundreds of tech startups that feared they would go bust if their deposits were wiped out.

"This morning, the government and the Bank of England facilitated a private sale of Silicon Valley Bank UK to HSBC," the chancellor, Jeremy Hunt, said on Twitter. "Deposits will be protected, with no taxpayer support. I said yesterday that we would look after our tech sector, and we have worked urgently to deliver that promise."

The Bank of England said the private deal would "stabilise" SVB UK, which made pre-tax profits of £88m last year and held about £6.7bn in deposits. It would also "minimise disruption to the UK technology sector and support confidence in the financial system", the central bank said.

HSBC's Quinn said: "This acquisition makes excellent strategic sense for our business in the UK. It strengthens our commercial banking franchise and

enhances our ability to serve innovative and fast-growing firms, including in the technology and life science sectors, in the UK and internationally."

Authorities had been considering a range of options to help SVB UK customers pay wages and suppliers, including an emergency fund that could provide a cash lifeline to support startups, as well as government-guaranteed loans for the sector, similar to those offered to businesses during the Covid crisis, but they are understood to have preferred a private deal.

It followed a tense 72 hours, with Rishi Sunak having been locked in weekend talks with the Bank of England governor, Andrew Bailey, and Hunt, who warned that the tech and life sciences sectors were at "serious risk" as a result of the bank's collapse.

HSBC was chosen over a handful of rivals that also expressed interest in taking over SVB UK, including the small business lender OakNorth, a Middle Eastern investment fund, and a consortium of private equity firms led by the fledgling clearing bank Bank of London.

While analysts said there was little chance of contagion across the banking sector – given that the biggest banks serve a wider range of customers and have plenty of capital – tech startups and investors were worried about ripple effects. A group of more than 200 tech executives said in an open letter to Hunt over the weekend that the loss of deposits had the potential to cripple the industry, with many businesses at risk of falling into insolvency overnight.

The Treasury summoned investors and industry lobby groups for an emergency meeting on Saturday as they tried to gauge the severity of SVB crisis.

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The final solution will safeguard the deposits of burgeoning businesses, with SVB UK customers ranging from the payments darling Wise, the cybersecurity firm DarkTrace and the ratings website Trustpilot, to small startups offering online auction platforms, tech services to the pharmaceuticals industry and AI for the maritime sector.

Dom Hallas, the executive director of the startup lobby group Coadec, said: "The government deserves huge credit. From the very top, to HM Treasury who understood the challenge and gripped it, to the huge number of civil servants who have likely not slept since Friday. They have saved hundreds of the UK's most innovative companies today."

Silicon Valley Bank, which was the 16th largest lender in the US, collapsed and had its assets seized by US regulators on Friday after a tumultuous 48 hours. The lender had been trying to raise emergency funding to plug a near $2bn (£1.7bn) hole in its finances, after an increase in withdrawals from customers in the tech industry who had seen funding dry up in recent months.

The Bank of England subsequently ordered its UK subsidiary into insolvency on Friday night, putting firms at risk of losing almost all their cash. Only £85,000 of clients' deposits would have been protected by the Financial Services Compensation Scheme, or £170,000 for joint accounts, meaning many of SVB UK's customers were facing major losses without government intervention.

It came as the US announced its own emergency support package to stem the fallout from the collapse of Silicon Valley Bank last week. SVB's customers will get access to all of their cash on Monday, in effect scrapping the $250,000 cap on their deposit protection. The deal was struck as regulators

wound up the New York-based Signature Bank, one of the main banks for the crypto industry, whose depositors will also avoid losses.

Shareholders and some unsecured debt holders will all be wiped out and other banks will be forced to cover any shortfalls in the industry-funded scheme. US regulators are also offering a $25bn pot of cheap loans to other American banks, providing a backstop to lenders needing quick cash because of market instability.

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Silicon Valley Bank in Santa Clara, California. Photograph: Nathan Frandino/Reuters

Banking

US guarantees all deposits after Silicon Valley Bank collapse, as Biden promises action

Announcement comes as Signature Bank was closed on Sunday by regulators – the second to fail in a week

Edward Helmore in New York
Sun 12 Mar 2023 19.19 EDTFirst published on Sun 12 Mar 2023 11.02 EDT

US financial regulators rolled out emergency measures on Sunday night to stem potential contagion from the collapse of Silicon Valley Bank. The measures include ensuring that depositors with the failed bank would have access to all their money on Monday morning.

Regulators announced the measure in a joint statement from the treasury secretary, Janet Yellen, the Federal Reserve chair, Jerome Powell, and the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation (FDIC) chair, Martin Gruenberg.

"Depositors will have access to all of their money starting Monday, March 13. No losses associated with the resolution of Silicon Valley Bank will be borne by the taxpayer," they said in a statement.

The announcement came as Signature Bank was closed on Sunday by regulators, the second to fail in a week. Depositors in Signature would also be made whole, the statement said.

"Rationally, this should be enough to stop any contagion from spreading and taking down more banks, which can happen in the blink of an eye in the digital age," said Capital Economics analyst Paul Ashworth. "But contagion has always been more about irrational fear, so we would stress that there is no guarantee this will work."

Banks will also now be allowed to borrow essentially unlimited amounts from the Federal Reserve for the next year, as long as the loans are matched by safe government securities, a way to prevent financial firms from having to sell a class of investments that have been losing value because of the Fed's own high interest rate policies.

This means banks will be able to easily access depositors' cash, without having to sell government bonds that have fallen in value over the last year, as interest rates have risen.

"The American people and American businesses can have confidence that their bank deposits will be there when they need them," Joe Biden said in a statement. The president is set to speak on Monday, to lay out how the US will maintain a resilient banking system.

"I am firmly committed to holding those responsible for this mess fully accountable and to continuing our efforts to strengthen oversight and regulation of larger banks so that we are not in this position again."

The interventions came after Yellen said on Sunday there would be no bailout for Silicon Valley Bank, which collapsed this week, raising fears of a crisis, but also said the Biden administration was working with regulators to help depositors hit by the fall of SVB.

Yellen said conditions did not match the 2008 financial crisis, when the collapse of large institutions threatened to bring down the global financial system. She also sought to calm fears the $23tn US banking system could be affected by the fall of a regional bank.

“The American banking system is really safe and well-capitalised, it’s resilient,” Yellen told CBS’s Face the Nation. “Americans can have confidence in the safety and soundness of our banking system.

“Let me be clear that during the financial crisis, there were investors and owners of systemic large banks that were bailed out … and the reforms that have been put in place means we are not going to do that again.

“But we are concerned about depositors and are focused on trying to meet their needs.”

The sudden failure of the California bank with assets valued at $212bn, which primarily lent to tech startups, rattled investors. Its clients include Etsy, Roku and Vox Media and its collapse has shaken a tech sector already facing difficulties including unprecedented layoffs.

On Friday, SVB was placed under the control of the FDIC, which guarantees deposits up to $250,000. Many companies and individuals stood to lose more than half of deposits in excess of that, according to some estimates.

Mark Warner, a Virginia Democrat on the US Senate banking committee, said SVB had been “caught in a bind” by higher interest rates. A run on the bank last week, with $42bn withdrawn on Thursday alone, was accelerated by “some actors”, he told ABC’s This Week.

Warner indicated consensus that “shareholders of [SVB] ought to lose their money. Depositors have been a different circumstance, but there are questions around moral hazard”.

The risk and financial advisory firm Kroll said it was “unlikely that an SVB-style bankruptcy will extend to the large banks”. But it warned that small community banks could face problems, a risk “much higher if uninsured depositors of SVB aren’t made whole”.

Regional banks have seen their values plunge since SVB’s woes emerged. New York-based Signature Bank provides banking services to law firms. Regulators said the decision to close it came “in light of market events, monitoring market trends.” Other banks including First Republic Bank, Western Alliance and PacWest have also been hit by SVB’s fall.

The failure of SVB “could be the first cockroach in the cellar”, the investment manager Fredric Russell told the Wall Street Journal. The failed bank was reportedly without a risk management officer for months before it collapsed.

“Banks get thrown into the dark pool of complacency, and then they lower their quality standards,” Russell said.

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Customers of Silicon Valley Bank have had their deposits secured by a late night deal between the US Treasury and Federal Reserve. Photograph: Avishek Das/SOPA Images/REX/Shutterstock

Banking

Explainer

Silicon Valley Bank: why did it collapse and is this the start of a banking crisis?

Until last Friday Silicon Valley Bank was the 16th largest bank in the US, worth more than $200bn

Jonathan Barrett
@barrett_ink
Mon 13 Mar 2023 02.42 EDTLast modified on Mon 13 Mar 2023 06.24 EDT

Four decades ago, Silicon Valley Bank (SVB) was born in the heart of a region known for its technological prowess and savvy decision making.

The California-headquartered organisation grew to become the 16th largest bank in the US, catering for the financial needs of technology companies around the world, before a series of ill-fated investment decisions led to its collapse.

What happened to SVB?

As the preferred bank for the tech sector, SVB's services were in hot demand throughout the pandemic years.

The initial market shock of Covid-19 in early 2020 quickly gave way to a golden period for startups and established tech companies, as consumers spent big on gadgets and digital services.

Many tech companies used SVB to hold the cash they used for payroll and other business expenses, leading to an influx of deposits. The bank invested a large portion of the deposits, as banks do.

The seeds of its demise were sown when it invested heavily in long-dated US government bonds, including those backed by mortgages. These were, for all intents and purposes, as safe as houses.

But bonds have an inverse relationship with interest rates; when rates rise, bond prices fall. So when the Federal Reserve started to hike rates rapidly to combat inflation, SVB's bond portfolio started to lose significant value.

If SVB were able to hold those bonds for a number of years until they mature, then it would receive its capital back. However, as economic conditions soured over the last year, with tech companies particularly affected, many of the bank's customers started drawing on their deposits.

SVB didn't have enough cash on hand, and so it started selling some of its bonds at steep losses, spooking investors and customers.

It took just 48 hours between the time it disclosed that it had sold the assets and its collapse.

What triggered the run on the bank?

Given banks only keep a portion of their assets as cash, they are susceptible to a rush of demand from customers.

While SVB's problems stem from its earlier investment decisions, the run was triggered on 8 March, when it announced a $1.75bn capital raising. It told investors it needed to plug a hole caused by the sale of its loss-making bond portfolio.

"Suddenly everyone became alarmed that the bank was short of capital," says Fariborz Moshirian, professor at UNSW and director of the Institute of Global Finance.

Customers were now aware of the deep financial problems at SVB, and started withdrawing money en masse.

Unlike a retail bank that caters for business and households, SVB's clients tended to have much larger accounts. This meant the bank run was swift.

Two days after it announced it would raise capital, the US$200bn company collapsed, marking the largest bank failure in the US since the global financial crisis.

Is this the start of a banking crisis?

Immediate concerns of widespread contagion have been contained by the US government's quick response in guaranteeing all deposits of the banks customers.

Financial futures, which allow investors to speculate on future price movements, rallied for the US technology sector in response to the guarantees.

There had been concerns that if that guarantee wasn't implemented, SVB account holders would not have been able to pay employees, sending ripples through the economy.

"In terms of stability, they've avoided supply chain consequences," says Moshirian.

Governments and regulators around the world, including in the UK and Australia, are checking for SVB exposure in their corporate and banking sectors.

The longer term questions is whether SVB's vulnerability to rising interest rates is paralleled in other banks through an over-exposure to falling bond prices.

While Moshirian says he doesn't think the banking system is about to unravel, he notes that people also initially felt that the sub-prime mortgage crisis was contained. That went on to spark the global financial crisis.

To counter the risk, the Federal Reserve has unveiled a new program that allows banks to borrow funds backed by government securities to meet demands from deposit customers.

This is designed to prevent banks from being forced to sell government bonds, for example, that have been losing value due to rising rates.

There are, however, more immediate concerns for the technology sector.

SVB catered for Silicon Valley, backing startups and other technology companies that traditional banks might shy away from.

In recent months, the sector has been cutting staff as economic conditions deteriorate. At a time they need financial backing, one of its biggest supporters has collapsed.

Did SVB receive a bailout?

The government is not saving SVB; it will stay collapsed – or wound up with remaining assets dispersed to creditors – unless a buyer can bring it back to life.

However, late on Sunday US agencies extended a guarantee to cover all deposits at the bank, as well as for customers at a second smaller institution, Signature Bank, that collapsed over the weekend. It means customers at SVB will be able to access all their money on Monday morning.

Shareholders in the bank and some unsecured creditors aren't protected by the guarantees.

Will this affect interest rates?

Central banks around the world have been raising rates over the past year to tame high inflation, with the US moving from near zero to more than 4.5% at a rapid pace.

Most forecasters expect rates to go higher in the US, UK and Australia, before stabilising.

The appetite to keep raising rates will now be tested if central banks become concerned that SVB's problems are indicative of a broader weakness in corporate balance sheets caused by rising rates.

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2023.03.13 - Spotlight

- **How to have a healthy brain The battle to boost our deep sleep – and help stop dementia**
- **Iraq war: 20 years on Long shadow of US invasion still looms over international order**
- **A new start after 60 Acting was my teenage dream – now I’m at the National Theatre**
- **‘I fear we are losing a whole generation of talent’ ENO head hits back at the ‘leave London’ ultimatum**



‘Sleep is not just a state where things turn off.’ Photograph: Adene Sanchez/Getty Images

How to have a healthy brainSleep

The battle to boost our deep sleep – and help stop dementia

The biological ‘brainwashing’ that happens while you are sleeping is crucial for filtering out toxins. Here’s how to optimise your overnight cycle

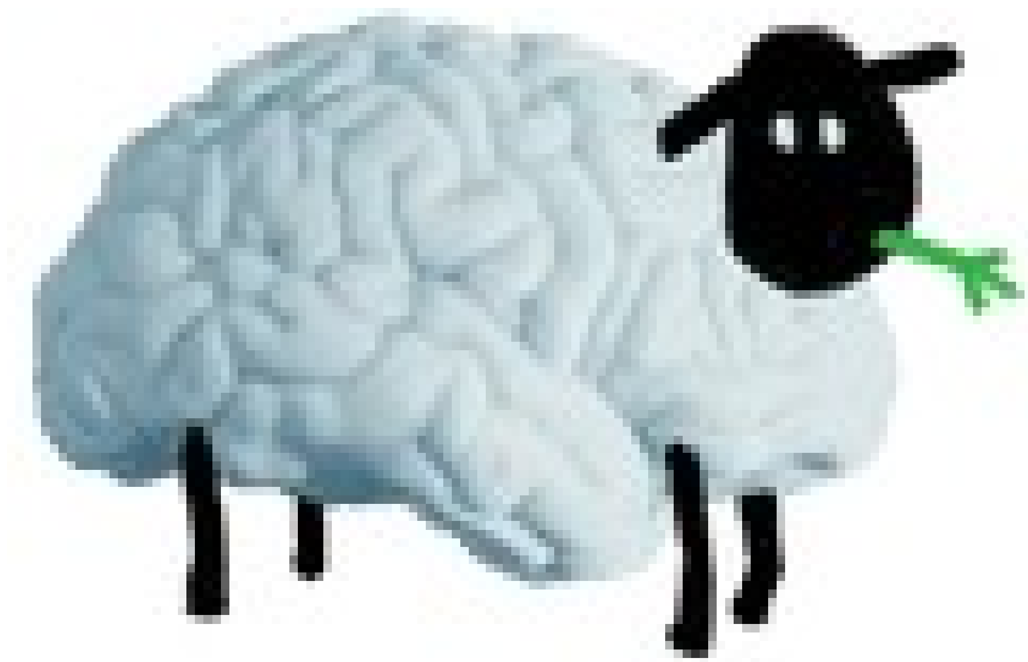
Linda Geddes

Mon 13 Mar 2023 03.00 EDTLast modified on Mon 13 Mar 2023 06.03 EDT

Tonight, and almost every night, something amazing will happen inside your brain. As you turn off the light switch and fall asleep, you will be switching on the neurological equivalent of a dishwasher deep-clean cycle. First, the activity of billions of brain cells will begin to synchronise, and oscillate between bursts of excitation and rest. Coupled with these “slow waves”, blood will begin to flow in and out of your brain, allowing pulses of the

straw-coloured cerebrospinal fluid (CSF) that usually surrounds your brain to wash in and be pushed through the brain tissue, carrying the day's molecular detritus away as it leaves.

Most people recognise that if they don't get enough sleep, their mood and memory will suffer the next day. But mounting evidence is implicating this "brainwashing" function of sleep in longer-term brain health.



Composite: Getty/Guardian Design

"Sleep is not just a state where things turn off. Sleep is a very active state for the brain – and it seems to be a special state for fluid flow within the brain," says Laura Lewis, assistant professor of biomedical engineering at Boston University, in the US, who has imaged this pumping process in sleeping humans.

If we don't get enough regular sleep, these toxic byproducts can accumulate, gradually increasing our risk of dementia and brain diseases. We tend to get less deep sleep as we get older, making it harder to clear out the debris. Fortunately, scientists are homing in on ways to boost this kind of sleep, which could ultimately help to keep our brains healthier for longer.

Doctors have long recognised the restorative properties of sleep, but it wasn't until 2012 that Prof Maiken Nedergaard at the University of

Rochester Medical Centre, in the US, and her colleagues identified a previously unknown plumbing system in the brain that springs to life during sleep, and enables the organ to clean itself.

They found a series of tiny channels surrounding the brain's blood vessels that allow CSF to filter in, and get pushed through the brain tissue by the pulse of blood alongside – and dubbed it "the glymphatic system", because it is similar to the body's lymphatic network except managed by the brain's glial (support) cells. Having such a system is important because your neurons are extremely active during the day, and produce waste that needs to go somewhere.



Composite: Getty/Guardian Design

"Just as if you don't have a filter in an aquarium, the fish will die in their own dirt, all this stuff accumulates in the brain that needs to be removed," Nedergaard says.

One such molecule is beta-amyloid, a toxic protein that accumulates inside the brains of Alzheimer's patients, and disrupts brain cell function. Nedergaard showed that significantly more beta-amyloid was removed from the brain during sleep. Other studies have found an association between lifelong sleep disruption, elevated levels of amyloid, and Alzheimer's risk.

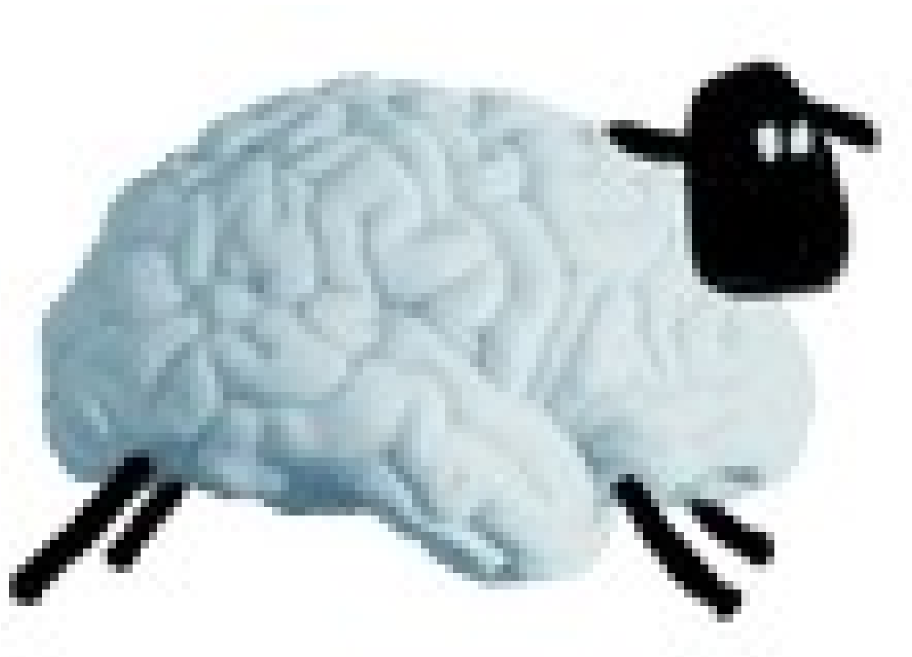
However, Nedergaard believes the system could be important for the clearance of many other molecules; from the tau protein that accumulates in Parkinson's disease to lactic acid, which builds up in the brain when we are awake and has been linked to seizures, to inflammatory molecules produced by immune cells resident in the brain.

Other researchers have suggested that the glymphatic system could provide a missing link between disrupted sleep and mood disorders such as bipolar, or psychiatric diseases including schizophrenia.

Lewis has expanded on Nedergaard's studies by persuading human volunteers to have their brains imaged while they sleep. "We saw these large waves of fluid flow that started to wash over the brain about every 20 seconds or so, and could travel quite long distances inside the brain," she says. "As soon as people woke up, this flow pattern would disappear."

This system seems to be most active during slow-wave sleep – the deepest phase of non-rapid eye movement sleep, predominating during the early hours of the morning.

For reasons that aren't yet fully understood, people experience less of this kind of sleep as they get older. The glymphatic system also shows a dramatic decrease in efficacy as we enter our later years. "Your dishwasher only works at 20% capacity," Nedergaard says.



Composite: Getty/Guardian Design

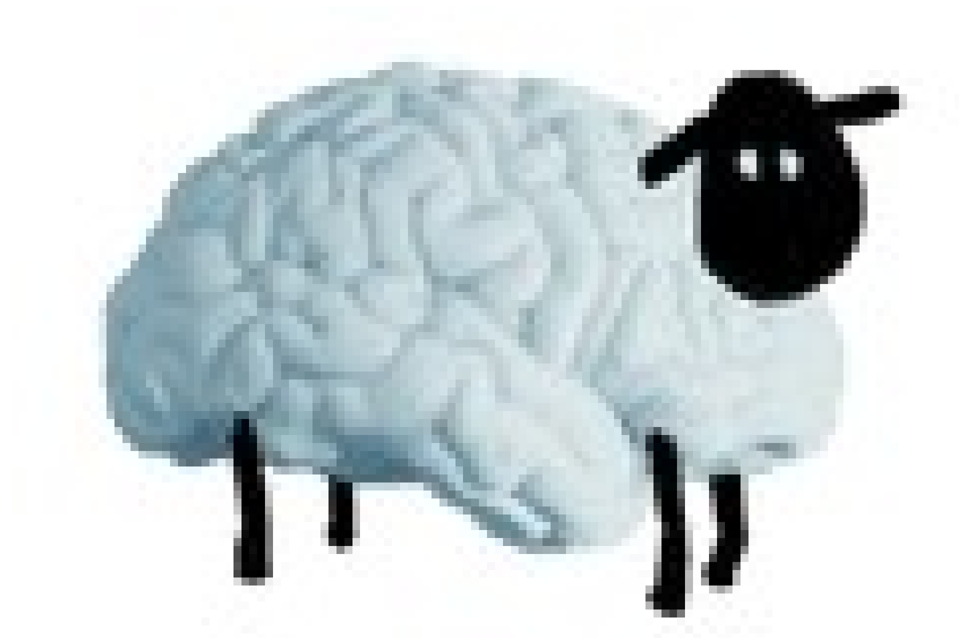
Deep sleep isn't only important for keeping the brain clean. We release growth hormone during it, helping to repair muscles, bones and immune cells. Deep sleep is also considered important for memory consolidation and the regulation of blood glucose.

So, what if scientists could find a way to reboot deep sleep as we get older? Prof Penelope Lewis, a sleep researcher at the University of Cardiff, believes this could be possible. Deep sleep is characterised by the brain's neurons firing together in bursts of electrical activity, followed by periods of relative inactivity – which can be visualised as "waves" on a recording of brain activity called an electroencephalogram (EEG). The Cardiff team has demonstrated that playing a "click" sound to sleeping volunteers as they approach the peak of each oscillation can enhance this neural synchrony, resulting in higher peaks and deeper troughs.

"If you keep doing that again and again, it can boost the amount of slow-wave sleep that you get, and it may boost the extent to which memories are consolidated across that sleep as well," Prof Lewis says.

Extending this to older adults appears to be more challenging. Although the Cardiff team has managed to boost their slow waves, "when we compare it

to what happens in a younger group, the effect is puny," she says. Researchers are now investigating whether targeting the sound to a particular time point during the oscillation could have a more powerful effect.



Composite: Getty/Guardian Design

Whether such approaches will be fruitful remains to be seen. In the meantime, there is plenty we can do to optimise the amount of deep sleep we get, regardless of our age.

The key thing to focus on is sleep quality, which means avoiding coffee, alcohol, exercise and electronic devices in the run-up to bed, and maintaining a dark bedroom overnight. "If light is coming in through the window, or from pilot lights on electronic devices, even if it doesn't wake you up, it may kick you into a lighter sleep stage and you won't feel as well rested," say Prof Lewis.

Sleep may look like a passive process, but as your consciousness checks out, the glymphatic system kicks in, helping to keep your brain fresh and clean. Just as with housework, if you miss the occasional session, no one may notice, but if you scrimp too much, the clutter will gradually accumulate and eventually come crashing down.

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Long shadow of US invasion of Iraq still looms over international order

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An actor's life for me … former journalist Duncan Hess in his dressing room at the National Theatre. Photograph: Courtesy of Duncan Hess

A new start after 60Life and style

A new start after 60: acting was my teenage dream – now I'm at the National Theatre

Duncan Hess grew up wanting to be an actor, instead becoming a successful director at the BBC. Now he has returned to his first love, and is already walking in the footsteps of the greats



[*Emma Beddington*]
Mon 13 Mar 2023 03.00 EDT

Duncan Hess spent 40 fulfilling, fascinating years directing for the BBC: “Every news programme there ever was; Antiques Roadshow; I travelled all over making documentaries …” His career culminated with directing the corporation’s coverage of the Queen’s lying in state last September. It was Hess who chose to feature the footage of Phillip Schofield and Holly Willoughby that scandalised the nation. “They weren’t queue jumping at all!” he says. “They were just walking past.”

But all that time, Hess had nourished a different dream, one born on a school trip to the RSC in Stratford aged 15 to see a production of Henry V. “I didn’t understand Shakespeare particularly but I found the whole experience thrilling. There was a wonderful Welsh actor called Emrys James who did [the chorus’s speech]: ‘Oh for a muse of fire that would ascend the brightest heaven of invention.’ I’m crying thinking about it now.” Galvanised, he wrote to the RSC asking if he could come back and hang around between shows, bagging a community centre floor to sleep on. He returned several times, listening to records of his hero, Laurence Olivier, at night in his sleeping bag after performances.

He joined Manchester Youth Theatre, playing a tiny part in Julius Caesar, but his youthful theatrical exploits stopped there. His parents, he says, dissuaded him from pursuing acting professionally. An uncle was a successful actor and comedy writer, including for Morecambe and Wise, and they feared his head had been turned by the glamour. "Mum and Dad thought I was very impressed with his jet-set showbiz lifestyle; but that had absolutely nothing to do with it."

He enjoyed the BBC ("I can't regret it; it has been fantastic fun"), but his passion for theatre never faded. "We'd go a lot, my wife and I, and every time I sat in the audience, I thought: 'I want to be up there.'" It was a need, he says, stronger than a desire, and as his 60th birthday approached, he resolved to do something about it. After trying out a few acting classes, he enrolled in a part-time acting diploma course at the Royal Central School of Speech and Drama in London, filling evenings and weekends learning his craft. He was, he says, by far the oldest, but "I had a fantastic time, I really enjoyed it".

> Playing a small part in a successful little play and having 60 people clapping – I found that so rewarding

His second career began in earnest in 2020, with auditions and roles in London pub theatre productions, and it was only at this point that he felt confident this new life really was for him. "I wasn't terrified, I remembered my lines and didn't walk into the furniture. That's obviously important, but it was the *thrill*." He had worried his dream was just to play leading roles on prestigious stages. "But, playing a small part in a successful little play and having 60 people clapping, I found that so rewarding. One reviewer called me 'an obvious highlight'!"

Now 65, and retired from his television career, he has accumulated the building blocks of a nascent acting career: an agent, the all-important entry in the casting directory Spotlight, and his big break in two comedies at Birmingham Rep in spring 2022. "What a thrill to go out and strangers laugh at what you say!" But it's not easy. Casting can feel like a closed shop – a top agent asked him, with brutal honesty: "Why on earth would anybody book you if they could book Kenneth Cranham?" The two do look similar.

His age, too, limits the work on offer. “The only roles I see advertised and get auditions for, either I’ve got dementia, I’m recently widowed or terminally ill.” Meanwhile, on Spotlight, “All I ever see is Santa work,” he says. “I could make a good living but it’s not what I want!”

That’s why he has taken his current role. He is sitting in his dressing room at the National Theatre, London, no less, waiting to go on in Phaedra, starring Janet McTeer. Hess is what is known as a “supernumerary” – a non-speaking part. “It’s such a horrible word. The definition is ‘in excess of the requisite number’; ‘not wanted or needed’.” The rationale for doing it, he says, is: “Casting at the National Theatre know what I look like now – simple as that. If in the next three months a me-shaped hole appears …”



Hess performing in Astronauts at the Royal Central School of Speech and Drama. Photograph: Patrick Baldwin

That’s not to say it isn’t exciting in its own right. Simply being in the building is, he says, “Absolutely thrilling. They were all here: Gielgud, Richardson, Judi Dench … When I go to the urinals, I think: ‘I wonder if Lord Olivier had a pee here …’” He says he walked around the foyer ostentatiously showing off his NT lanyard for a while, but stopped when too many people took him for an usher.

The part is simple. "I sit silently eating spaghetti for 10 minutes," he says. "All I do is pretend to have a conversation with my pretend son, then look shocked when something shocking happens. Then I get the train home." But it's exhausting, and he feels bad about leaving his wife alone six nights a week for two months (although she is extremely supportive of his new career, as are the rest of his family). Even so, being on the National's Lyttelton stage, with the audience barely 10ft away, is extraordinary. "The lights go down, the curtain goes up and they're just lit by the exit signs so there's a sort of glow – it's a jolt of electricity." There are 800 people in the auditorium, he says. "At any moment at least one of them is going to be watching us!"

Does he wish he had made the change sooner? "God, yes. It's strange that it took 50 years between sleeping listening to Laurence Olivier records and having a pass into the National Theatre." But he's making up for lost time, and could well have 15 good years left, he says. He wants casting directors to understand that, and is frustrated by the ageism he encounters. Theatre courses for "emerging talent" are often reserved for under-26s. "But I am emerging! I've been in this wizened old chrysalis for 60 years and now look at my iridescent wings!"

- Tell us: has your life taken a new direction after the age of 60?

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‘I don’t need to be a control freak’ … Miskimmon at rehearsals. Photograph: David Levene/The Guardian

Opera

Interview

‘I fear we are losing a whole generation of talent’: ENO head hits back at the ‘leave London’ ultimatum

Erica Jeal

As she stages a new production of The Dead City, Korngold’s wild opera banned by the Nazis, English National Opera’s artistic director Annilese Miskimmon talks about the company’s strong present and uncertain future



Mon 13 Mar 2023 02.00 EDTLast modified on Tue 14 Mar 2023 12.17 EDT

‘I’ve been a bit obsessed with it for a long time,” says Annilese Miskimmon of the opera she’s rehearsing in the studio downstairs. Her words are appropriate: if there has ever been an opera about obsession, then Erich Wolfgang Korngold’s Die Tote Stadt (The Dead City) is it. The opera, completed in 1920 and steeped in the communal sense of loss after the first world war, tells the story of a bereaved husband finally coming to terms with his wife’s death through a hallucinatory experience, after a chance encounter with her doppelganger. Or, as Miskimmon more punchily describes it, “a subconscious psychological thriller about a man who’s in a love triangle with a fantasy sex goddess and his dead wife”.

It’s quite a synopsis. Yet it’s the equally heady music that drew her to stage the work for her second production as artistic director of English National Opera – a welcome distraction, one imagines, from the current uncertainty over the company’s future, of which more later. Die Tote Stadt was an early hit for Korngold, completed when he was 23; the composer, who was Jewish, would later flee Vienna and find a home in the US, where his sumptuous film scores defined the sound of Hollywood movies for decades to come. The opera was banned by the Nazis yet has made its way back to the edge of the repertoire on mainland Europe and in the US. Still, it waited until 2009 for its first and so far only staging in the UK, at the Royal Opera. “I really wanted to hear our orchestra play it,” says Miskimmon. “It fills the Coliseum in such a way that we can really indulge the sound.”

The scene Miskimmon has been rehearsing has the husband, Paul, watching in horror as a group of partygoers – all in his mind, but very much visible to the audience – invade his house and desecrate mementoes of his wife, Marie: they stub cigarettes out on her photo frame, lark about with her favourite record. An elegant mid-century drinks trolley gets wheeled on drunkenly, shortly followed by Marie’s coffin; sketches taped on the studio walls include a group of nuns, who feature earlier in Paul’s marathon hallucination.



Heady and hallucinatory … The Dead City coming to life. Photograph: David Levene/The Guardian

All a bit bonkers, yes – but the opera still speaks to today's audiences, Miskimmon says. "It explores how grief meets religion meets the subconscious. I think very few people go through life without falling madly in love – when it's not about that person, but about your own stuff; there's something very modern and interesting about the idea that infatuation can be both very negative and an incredibly creative act. As I get older I have a greater appreciation of how life becomes about moving through various losses. This is a piece about a path through grief to a world that is lesser but still worth living in. Yet it's not depressing – it's full of beauty and colour and fun."

In rehearsal, Miskimmon keeps the pace going but allows each cast member space to try things out, letting them know when they alight on something that works for her. "As a director I know what I want but I don't want to know how to get there – because then you treat the performers in the room like robots instead of artists. I suppose I have the confidence that I don't need to be a control freak, and that I and the people I work with will create something more surprising and beautiful when everyone feels they are a part of the process."

> I saw my first ever Tristan und Isolde at the ENO for £5. The Wagnerites in the gods fed me sandwiches

That confidence was forged early in her career – before her stints in charge of Ireland's Opera Theatre Company, Danish National Opera and Norwegian National Opera – when Miskimmon worked as assistant to some of the most respected directors in the opera world: Richard Jones, Deborah Warner, David Alden and the late Graham Vick. "Graham had this ability, which I believe in as well, especially as an artistic director – that you make work inspired by the actual place you are in and the audience there."

That's a hard thing for Miskimmon to do at the moment, though, given that nobody knows where ENO will be in a year's time. In November, Arts Council England (ACE) announced it was axing ENO's £12.6m annual grant

unless the company moved wholesale out of London, throwing in the idea of Manchester as a possible destination, but without backing this up with any sort of plan or research. January brought a temporary reprieve, but a move out of London by 2026 is still demanded.

In late February ENO's chief executive, Stuart Murphy, told the Stage that 10 areas were in contention, from Newcastle to Truro to East Croydon, but that ACE was also now recognising the Coliseum – its London HQ – as key to the company's future. If the funding were right, he suggested, ENO could continue to do just as much work there while also putting on a season in its new home location. As Miskimmon knows, that's a very big if indeed.



Current triumph … Wagner's Rhinegold. Photograph: Jane Hobson/Rex/Shutterstock

And yet the demand for opera in the Coliseum is demonstrably there, and the ACE announcement unleashed an outpouring of support for the company that she has found both humbling and empowering. Ticket sales are, she says, back at pre-Covid levels, with recent runs of Carmen, Akhnaten and The Rhinegold selling especially strongly. "There is this lie that we don't sell out the Coliseum, and it's really not true," says Miskimmon. "The response from the audience and the atmosphere in the Coliseum has never

been greater. In these conversations with the arts council the artistic value and health of the company has never been in doubt."

Yet how much does ACE value that artistic health? November's funding decisions represented a 30% decrease in money for UK opera as a whole – which, especially when taken together with last week's announcement of job losses across the BBC orchestras and the complete closure of the BBC Singers, paints a bleak picture of a country with little care for the future of its classical music industry. ACE's chief executive, Darren Henley, tried to defend its decision by writing that the future of the art form might lie in the "fresh thinking" of "opera in car parks, opera in pubs, opera on your tablet", omitting to mention that England's first drive-in car-park opera had been staged very successfully, mid-pandemic, by … ENO.

"There is no doubt that there is amazing alternative work going on elsewhere, which is growing audiences and is essential to the art form," says Miskimmon, "but a lot of those people who make opera in digital form or in smaller spaces are also saying to me, 'I want to work with ENO, I want to work at the bigger scale.' At the moment, because our planning is on pause, I'm not able to give them opportunities, and that is really worrying.

"There is fear in the whole UK opera world when you look at that 30% loss of funding and the effect on talent, innovation, accessibility and the future of the art form. It's bigger than ENO. The reason why you have internationally renowned UK talent is because they have come through an ecosystem that supports artists at every stage. Taking ENO out of that ecosystem is devastating. I fear we are losing a whole generation of talent who cannot be sustained in this country."

How does Miskimmon herself define ENO? "I've thought this right from when I was a student and came here for £5 and saw my first ever Tristan and Isolde, with the Wagnerites around me in the gods feeding me sandwiches: that when you walk into the Coliseum for a show, there's a feeling of excitement I've never felt with another opera company. I think it's something to do with the fact that ENO wants to reveal things about operas in a way that honours these pieces but keeps the shock of the new. That thrill of discovery is so much part of ENO. I've worked for lots of wonderful

organisations, and all of them have schemes and support to invite people who haven't been to opera before, but the thing about ENO is that it's in its DNA."

English National Opera's The Dead City is at the London Coliseum from 25 March to 8 April

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2023.03.13 - Opinion

- **As the disturbing scenes in Tunisia show, anti-migrant sentiments have gone global**
- **BBC cowardice caused the Gary Lineker rebellion. And there will be more unless it finds some courage**
- **Crazy, embarrassing, sad – but funny: how I finally embraced my X Factor humiliation**
- **How long can one family ignore a revolting garden mess? I’ll get back to you**



Illustration: Tomekah George/The Guardian

OpinionMigration

As the disturbing scenes in Tunisia show, anti-migrant sentiments have gone global

Nesrine Malik



President Saied is scapegoating his country's small black migrant population to distract from political failings. Does this sound familiar?

Mon 13 Mar 2023 02.00 EDTLast modified on Mon 13 Mar 2023 06.19 EDT

A little more than 10 years ago, calls for freedom and human rights in Tunisia triggered the Arab spring. Today, black migrants in the country are being attacked, spat at and evicted from their homes. The country's racism crisis is so severe that hundreds of black migrants have been repatriated.

It all happened quickly, triggered by a speech by the Tunisian president, Kais Saied, at the end of February. He urged security forces to take urgent measures against migrants from sub-Saharan Africa, who he claimed were moving to the country and creating an "unnatural" situation as part of a criminal plan designed to "change the demographic makeup" and turn Tunisia into "just another African country that doesn't belong to the Arab and Islamic nations any more". "Hordes of irregular migrants from sub-Saharan Africa" had come to Tunisia, he added, "with all the violence, crime and unacceptable practices that entails".

For scale, the black migrant population in Tunisia is about 21,000 out of a population of 12 million, and yet a sudden fixation with their presence has taken over. A general hysteria has unleashed a pogrom on a tiny migrant population whose members have little impact on the country's economics or politics – reports from human rights organisations tell of night-time raids and daylight stabbings. Hundreds of migrants, now homeless, are encamped, cowering, outside the International Organization for Migration's offices in Tunis as provocation against them continues to swirl.

Josephus Thomas, a political refugee from Sierra Leone, spoke to me from the camp, where he is sheltering with his wife and child after they were evicted from their home and his life savings were stolen. They sleep in the cold rain, wash in a nearby park's public toilet and sleep around a bonfire with one eye open in anticipation of night-time ambushes by Tunisian youths. So far, they have been attacked twice. "There are three pregnant women here, and one who miscarried as she was running for her life." Due to the poor sanitation, "all the ladies are having infections", he says. "Even those who have a UNHCR card", who are formally recognised as legitimate refugees, are not receiving the help they are entitled to. "The system is not working."

Behind this manufactured crisis is economic failure and political dereliction. "The president of the country is basically crafting state policy based on conspiracy theories sloshing around dark corners of the internet basement," Monica Marks, , a professor of Middle East studies and an expert on Tunisia, tells me. The gist of his speech was essentially the "great replacement" theory, but with a local twist. In this version of the myth, Europeans are using black people from sub-Saharan Africa to make Tunisia a black-inhabited settler colony.

Confecting an immigration crisis is useful, not only as a distraction from Saied's failures, but as a political strategy to hijack state and media institutions, and direct them away from meaningful political opposition or scrutiny.



Migrants have set up camp outside the offices of the International Organization for Migration (IOM) in Tunis, over fears for their future. Photograph: Mohamed Hammi/Sipa/Rex/Shutterstock

The speed with which the hysteria spread shows that these attitudes had been near the surface all along. Racism towards black Arabs and black sub-Saharan Africans is entrenched in the Arab world – a legacy of slavery and a fetishised Arab ethnic supremacy. In Arab north Africa, racism towards black people is complicated even further by a paranoia of proximity – being situated on the African continent means there is an extreme sensitivity to being considered African at all, or God forbid, black. In popular culture, racist tropes against other black Arabs or Africans are widespread, portraying them as thick, vulgar and unable to speak Arabic without a heavy accent.

The movement of refugees from and through the global south has further inflamed bigotries and pushed governments, democratic or otherwise, towards extinguishing these people's human rights. Local histories and international policies create a perfect storm in which it becomes acceptable to attack a migrant in their home because of "legitimate concerns" about economic insecurity and cultural dilution.

Globally, there is a grim procession of countries that have made scapegoating disempowered outsiders a central plank of government policy. But there is a new and ruthless cruelty to it in the UK and Europe. The European Union tells the British prime minister, Rishi Sunak, that his small boat plans violate international law, but the EU has for years followed an inhumane migrant securitisation policy that captures and detains migrants heading to its shores in brutal prisons run by militias for profit. Among them are a "hellhole" in Libya and heavily funded joint ventures with the human rights-abusing dictatorship in Sudan.

Only last week, in the middle of this storm, the Italian prime minister, Giorgia Meloni, had a warm call with her Tunisian counterpart, Najla Bouden Romdhane, on, among other topics, "the migration emergency and possible solutions, following an integrated approach". This sort of bloodless talk of enforcement at all costs, Marks says, "speaks to the ease with which political elites, state officials, can render fascism part of the everyday political present".

So where do you turn if you are fleeing war, genocide and sexual violence? If you want to exercise a human right, agreed upon in principle more than 70 years ago, "to seek and enjoy in other countries asylum from persecution"? The answer is anywhere, because no hypothetical deterrent is more terrifying than an unsafe present.

You will embark on an inhuman odyssey that might end with a midnight raid on your home in Tunis, a drowning in the Channel, or, if you're lucky, a stay in Sunak and Macron's newly agreed super-detention centres. People in jeopardy will move. That is certain. All that we guarantee through cynical deterrent policies is that we will make their already fraught journey even more dangerous.

- Nesrine Malik is a Guardian columnist
- ***Do you have an opinion on the issues raised in this article? If you would like to submit a response of up to 300 words by email to be considered for publication in our letters section, please click here.***

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‘The most urgent requirement is to make peace with a football presenter who was always popular and has now been turned into a national treasure.’ Gary Lineker outside his home in London on Sunday. Photograph: Henry Nicholls/Reuters

OpinionBBC

BBC cowardice caused the Gary Lineker rebellion. And there will be more unless it finds some courage

John Kampfner



The corporation needs clear and consistent rules. But more than anything it must learn to stop cowering before politicians

Mon 13 Mar 2023 03.00 EDTLast modified on Mon 13 Mar 2023 15.42 EDT

In 2005, I wrote a cover piece in the New Statesman, which I was editing at the time, detailing BBC management's concerns about John Humphrys' pugnacious style on Iraq and other issues, and their desire for political interviews to be toned down. This was shortly after the highly tendentious Hutton inquiry that had forced out the BBC chairman and director general. This was under a Labour government.

To illustrate the story, we chose an old-fashioned television with spindly legs alongside the logo and the words "Broken, Beaten, Cowed". That was the BBC then: that is the BBC now in the shadow of the Gary Lineker saga.

A couple of years earlier, I had been asked to do stand-in presenting on The World Tonight, my favourite programme, and the only domestic news show that focuses on foreign affairs. It was all going well. Listeners seemed content; the editor was happy. Then the word came down from on high that

someone attached to a leftwing magazine (I was political editor of the New Statesman then) should not be given such exposure, as that might compromise BBC impartiality. All the while, editorial leadership was falling over itself to give Andrew Neil, the chairman of the Spectator, as many interview programmes as he could manage.

I don't regard this as bias – although the BBC has had a more enduring revolving door for journalists and management with the Conservatives than it has had with Labour. I regard it more as a craven reflex towards political bullying that has been going on, to a great or lesser extent, for decades. Labour isn't bad at it, but Tory governments, bolstered by their polemicist friends in certain newspapers, have shown themselves over the decades to be far more accomplished playground thugs.

Two other instincts are the herd mentality and risk aversion. I will cite one more example, this time from 2000: I had been assigned to Today to do political features, with a brief to "push the boat out". I was suspicious that I was being set up for a fall, but I took up the challenge. On one occasion, on the main 8.10am slot, I did a "two-way", saying that Mo Mowlam, the Northern Ireland secretary, feared she would be punished for receiving a rapturous ovation at Labour's conference, upstaging an envious prime minister. I can say it now because she sadly died long ago. She had told me this in the bar at Blackpool the night before; I checked with her that she was comfortable with running the story.

Within minutes of it airing, amid much f-ing and blinding from Downing Street, one manager sidled up to me near the toilets. "I just want to be sure that you're confident you got it right," he said to me. "Because I need to be sure I can defend you in case of trouble." Trying to mask my exasperation, I told him that if I hadn't been, I wouldn't have run it. As it turns out, Mowlam was entirely correct: she was sidelined.

I decided I wouldn't hang around; I concluded, with sadness, that there were better places to do rigorous journalism.

That is the BBC at its worst. As it has been over the past few days. As it defaults to being at the first sign of trouble, which is much of the time. This is the same organisation that believes it is populated by "remainers", having

been the midwife to Brexit, by giving equivalent airtime to lies propagated by the leave team in the cause of “balance”.

This is the same organisation that has encouraged much of its best talent to leave because it did not stand up to the government over the licence fee settlement, leaving a hollowed-out newsroom. This is the same organisation that is emasculating its international output, on TV and radio, at a time when Chinese and Russian propaganda organs are expanding fast.

The most urgent requirement in this latest of many self-inflicted meltdowns is to turn today’s truce into genuine peace with a football presenter who was always popular and has now been turned into a national treasure. The second is to sort out the mess that are impartiality guidelines, enforced far more assiduously on liberal than conservative employees or contractors. Hopefully the independent review now announced will do that.

The third is to remove inconsistencies and hypocrisies. You should not stop one celebrity freelance from speaking out, while allowing others to. You should not remove a journalist from a leftwing magazine from presenting shifts, while allowing one from its rightwing rival to have as many programmes as he likes.

The most important task, however, it is to acquire a spine, to understand that the next time a minister harangues you (which will be tomorrow, the next day and the day after), you tell them to take a running jump.

Like dry rot, the fear principle is now so ingrained that it will take a long time to scrape it out. Friends in Russia, Georgia, Turkey, and all those fighting for freedom of expression, are scratching their heads at the notion of an institution long respected around the world taking its best-known sports presenter off air because he has the temerity to speak out passionately on asylum. That is not a good look for the UK.

The BBC is one of Britain’s few global selling points. To survive with any credibility and to retain what support it still has, the repair work has to begin urgently.

- John Kampfner is an author and broadcaster

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Emily Wilson in a scene from Fixed, her show about her experience on The X Factor US.

Why I quitThe X Factor

Crazy, embarrassing, sad – but funny: how I finally embraced my X Factor humiliation

Emily Wilson



I spent 10 years burying the shame of being a failed contestant on the US version of the show. Then a 15-year-old helped me see it differently

Mon 13 Mar 2023 04.00 EDTLast modified on Wed 15 Mar 2023 04.24 EDT

My name is Emily, I'm a standup comedian and when I was 15, I was on The X Factor US. But if you'd told me back then that I'd be willingly telling you that, let alone regaling audiences – while touring a show – about the experience, I'd tell you that you were in the wrong multiverse, dumbass! Couldn't be me!

I auditioned for The X Factor with my best friend, Austin, in 2011. We went in with full confidence that we not only had the raw talent for stardom, but also the branding: who *wouldn't* love a pubescent boy-girl duet with a name as brilliantly punny as AusEm?

We were only half wrong. The judges loved Austin but hated me. The direct Nicole Scherzinger quote is: "I'm sorry, but for AusEm, no. But I believe in you, Austin." It was brutal. What was probably my worst fear at the time was coming true in front of millions of people. Not to mention Nicole both

looked like and had the same name as my middle-school bully. Who did I kill in a past life to deserve this?

They still sent AusEm through, and we eventually got to the finals in Hollywood. But after the eight-month rollercoaster ended (spoiler: we didn't win), all I was left with was extreme shame, embarrassment and *two* Nicoles on my shit list. After some wallowing, I became determined to completely redefine myself and bury The X Factor in the past.



Ausem on The X Factor US in 2011. Photograph: Emily Wilson

Cut to 10 years later: the summer of 2021. Not much had changed – with my attitude, I mean. The world had had quite the decade (Trump, global pandemic, Despicable Me 2, etc).

I was now 25, and I was returning to standup comedy after 15 months off because of Covid. Throughout the pandemic, I didn't really jot down many observations because I was too busy trying to make brownies but eating all the batter before I cooked them. And my pre-Covid jokes felt so unfunny to me. What's funny about "You know how life rocks and we'll always be able to hang out and kiss our friends without the fear of contracting a deadly disease"? At first, I walked around New York for inspiration. I came up with some pretty biting material. Stuff like, "Rollerbladers are pretty weird."

Then, one weekend in August, I was in New Jersey with my boyfriend. We were talking about one of my new jokes ("Skateboarders are odd, right?"), when his younger brother, then 15, asked me about The X Factor. I gave him the usual, "Yeah, it was crazy," and tried to change the subject to something else that would interest a teenager, like geometry.

He kept asking questions and I caved. Our conversation led to the inevitable YouTube search for the audition. He turned his phone sideways and the three of us began to watch.

Despite the 10-year gap, I physically could not bear it. I walked a few feet away, plugging my ears. "You can keep watching, I just truly cannot look at that," I told them. I remember thinking how it sucked that my boyfriend's brother, who I love and respect, had seen the evidence that at my core I am not normal and cool, but rather a pathetic, sad-sack loser. But to my surprise, he didn't say, "Yikes! Emily, you're actually so weird and I've lost all respect for you." More than anything, he just couldn't believe that had happened to me.

Almost immediately, my boyfriend insisted I write material about it. This was not the first time he, or anyone, had suggested the idea. Over the years, people who found out about my disastrous X Factor stint would often suggest I talk about it on stage. "That would be so funny!" To whom?

But my boyfriend was seeing more than just the funny in it. He saw how much the experience was still clearly affecting me, which made it, in his eyes, the source material that could take me to the next level, both as a comedian and a person.

Maybe it was something in the thick, garbage-filled New Jersey air but, this time, I kinda saw it. It's a funny story. It's crazy and sad and humiliating, but funny. Seeing my 15-year-old self on stage, being told that I wasn't good at singing, my one dream, by none other than *Justin Bieber's producer*!? For the first time, the absurdity of it made me laugh. I had my doubts, but I decided that writing about this was better than what I'm assuming my next "joke" would've been: "Bicyclists are absolutely insane – right, everyone?"

A week later, I tried a 10-minute set about the audition. It is, to this day, the most scared I've ever felt while doing standup. But it was invigorating. In letting go of the shame, I started to see the humour and catharsis that could be found in facing my embarrassing past. And to my surprise, people also related to my story.

Since making this show, Fixed, I've seen the principle behind my decision to do so permeate my life beyond the stage. I now worry less about things like, "Was I weird to so-and-so last night?" because there's no point: I definitely was weird. But odds are, they're at home reeling about how weird they were too.

And instead of holding my breath when I open old diaries, I've come to appreciate the insane level of detail I provided about my endless anxieties, and often learn a thing or two about myself in the retrospective process.

Choosing to talk about The X Factor showed me that harbouring embarrassment is never worth it. Facing it, while terrifying, is much more exciting.

- Emily Wilson is a comedian. She performs Fixed at London's Soho Theatre from 13 to 18 March 2023. Book tickets here
- ***Do you have an opinion on the issues raised in this article? If you would like to submit a response of up to 300 words by email to be considered for publication in our letters section, please click here.***

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‘The beakers would make a nice prefab nest for long-tailed tits …’ Photograph: Blackday/Alamy

OpinionGardens

How long can one family ignore a revolting garden mess? I’ll get back to you

Emma Beddington



My sons' festering protein shake beakers have been living outside for months, part science experiment, part artwork – and don't forget pure laziness and passive aggression

Mon 13 Mar 2023 03.00 EDTLast modified on Tue 14 Mar 2023 02.12 EDT

After a brief Fool's Spring, Second Winter is upon us, leaden and inevitable. But, despite the slush, there are cheering hints of colour: I can see a pop of red in the garden from my office window. Is it a tulip? No – it's the lid from a protein shake beaker. They've been living out there for nearly a year. After I fell over yet another one festering next to the sofa with three inches of stinking "plant protein" left to ferment in the bottom, the iron entered my soul. I chucked them all outside, unwisely reasoning that at some point someone would need, retrieve and clean them.

That never happened, and I have doubled down on my idiocy by just leaving them there. They have now become a garden feature, the kind of thing you notice occasionally, think "I should do something about that," then ignore. The lids became separated from the beakers and set out on a frolic of their own, rolled by the wind in all directions. I see one beaker is gracing a pot of daffodils; another miraculously appeared on the scaffolding covering the house.

Occasionally, when I pass them, I take pictures of them to circulate to the household WhatsApp. One protein enthusiast who may be related to me responded unrepentantly to a photo of three nestled in a plant pot this autumn, gloop still terrifyingly intact, by explaining he was “trying to develop a bacterium adapted to the high amino acid environment of vegan protein powder”.

Biochemistry experiment or site-specific found-object art piece (they just need a Damien Hirst-esque title, something like The Impossibility of Doing Anything Constructive in 2023), they are now a monument to my sloth. I would passive-aggressively plant something pretty in them if I weren’t so lazy; instead I’m hoping they find a place in the backyard ecosystem. The beakers would make a nice prefab nest for long-tailed tits, maybe; hedgehogs could sip water from the lids. Worst-case scenario, they’ll be a fun puzzle for future archaeologists.

Emma Beddington is a Guardian columnist

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2023.03.13 - Around the world

- **Fox News Network braces for more turbulence as second defamation lawsuit advances**
- **Japan Man granted retrial after 45 years on death row**
- **‘Elated and proud’ India erupts with joy after historic Oscar wins**
- **China Xi Jinping vows to oppose Taiwan ‘pro-independence’ influences as third term begins**
- **Kenzaburo Oe Nobel prize-winning Japanese writer dies aged 88**



Although Dominion's lawsuit Fox has garnered the most attention, Smartmatic's suit could be more dangerous to the news channel. Photograph: Timothy A Clary/AFP/Getty Images

Fox News

Fox News braces for more turbulence as second defamation lawsuit advances

New York court greenlights $2.7bn suit against news channel by election company Smartmatic over 2020 presidential election lies

Ed Pilkington
@edpilkington
Mon 13 Mar 2023 02.00 EDTLast modified on Mon 13 Mar 2023 11.09 EDT

As Rupert Murdoch's Fox Corporation battles to contain the Dominion lawsuit scandal that has engulfed its top executives and stars, another crisis is building in the wings that has the potential to cause further turbulence for the media empire.

Smartmatic's lawsuit against Fox News has attracted only a fraction of the attention garnered by the legal action of Dominion Voting Systems. Yet both firms are suing Fox for defamation related to its coverage of Donald Trump's stolen-election lie, and both pose a serious threat to Fox's finances and reputation.

In fact, on paper Smartmatic's suit appears to be the more dangerous. It's demanding damages of $2.7bn, compared with Dominion's $1.6bn.

So far, attempts by Fox lawyers to have the Smartmatic case dismissed have fallen on stony ground. Last week the New York state supreme court in Manhattan gave the green light for the case to proceed against Fox News, the Fox Business host Maria Bartiromo, the former business anchor Lou Dobbs and Trump's former lawyer Rudy Giuliani.

Smartmatic, a global election technology company headquartered in London, lodged its defamation suit in February 2021. "The Earth is round," was the complaint's striking opening sentence. "Two plus two equals four. Joe Biden and Kamala Harris won the 2020 election … "

The complaint goes on to argue that, contrary to these indisputable facts, Fox News broadcast a series of blatant lies in support of Trump's stolen election conspiracy theory. "Defendants did not want Biden to win the election. They wanted President Trump to win re-election … They also saw an opportunity to capitalize on President Trump's popularity by inventing a story."

To prop up that story, the lawsuit claims, Fox needed a villain. That villain was Smartmatic.

Smartmatic claims that more than 100 false statements were broadcast by Fox News hosts and guests. Smartmatic was falsely said to have been involved in 2020 election counts in six battleground states – in fact, it was present only at the count in Los Angeles county.

Fox broadcast that Smartmatic shared its technology with Dominion, when in fact the two companies had no communication and regarded each other as rivals. Smartmatic was in cahoots with foreign governments in a conspiracy

to rig the vote for Biden, Giuliani said on Bartiromo's show – a claim that the company disputes as false and defamatory.

Fox also described Smartmatic as having been founded in Venezuela at the behest of corrupt dictators. In fact, it was founded by Antonio Mugica and Roger Piñate in 2000 in Boca Raton, Florida, in the wake of the "hanging chad" fiasco, with the aim of using technology to restore people's faith in election results.

The business has since grown around the world. The firm claims that it has lost clients as a result of what it calls Fox's "disinformation campaign".

Fox News has disputed Smartmatic's multibillion estimate of its losses, calling it vastly inflated.

A spokesperson for the broadcaster told the Guardian: "Freedom of the press is foundational to our democracy and must be protected, in addition to the damages claims being outrageous, unsupported and not rooted in sound financial analysis, serving as nothing more than a flagrant attempt to deter our journalists from doing their jobs. There is nothing more newsworthy than covering the president of the US and his lawyers making allegations."

Smartmatic has a very high bar to meet if it is to win the defamation suit at trial. New York state law has a rigorous approach to the first amendment of the US constitution which preserves press freedom.

Under it, plaintiffs have to be able to convince a jury that not only did the media outlet put out false information, it did so with "actual malice". That means that it either knew it was peddling a lie and went ahead anyway, or showed a reckless disregard for the truth.

"New York is pretty protective of media rights," said Roy Gutterman, a media law professor at Syracuse University who was a consultant early on in the Smartmatic case advising a non-party entity. "Every year I read a lot of cases from New York, and it's hard to be successful in this state."

Despite this tough challenge, so far the wind is in Smartmatic's sails. David Cohen, the New York supreme court justice presiding over the litigation, has

indicated that the company has a strong enough case to go to trial.

In last week's ruling, Cohen found that "at a minimum, Fox News turned a blind eye to a litany of outrageous claims" about Smartmatic. "Plaintiffs have pleaded facts sufficient to allow a jury to infer that Fox News acted with actual malice."

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Iwao Hakamada at a press conference in 2019. Photograph: 195122+0900/AP

Japan

Japanese man granted retrial after 45 years on death row

Iwao Hakamada, 87, was convicted of four murders in 1968 but granted 'temporary release' in 2014 after new evidence emerged

Justin McCurry in Tokyo
Mon 13 Mar 2023 05.55 EDTLast modified on Mon 13 Mar 2023 17.59 EDT

A court in Japan has granted a retrial to a man – thought to be the world's longest-serving death row inmate – who was sentenced to hang for the murders of a family of four almost six decades ago.

The Tokyo high court ruled on Monday that Iwao Hakamada, 87, should be tried again for the crimes in a decision campaigners said was a "step towards

justice”.

Hakamada was convicted of the murders in 1968 and spent 45 years on death row before new evidence led to his release in 2014. At the time of his release, he was thought to be the world’s longest-serving death row inmate.

The former boxer initially confessed to the murders but later retracted his confession and insisted he was innocent throughout his two-year trial. His death sentence was finalised in 1980.

Hakamada’s lawyers unfurled banners reading “retrial” after Monday’s ruling, while his sister, Hideko, expressed relief that decades of pressure had succeeded.

“I have waited 57 years for this day, and now it has arrived,” said the 90-year-old, who has campaigned to prove her brother’s innocence. “Finally a weight has been lifted from my shoulders.”



Hideko Hakamada (centre) with Hideyo Ogawa, a lawyer for Iwao Hakamada, after the retrial was ordered. Photograph: Kazuhiro Nogi/AFP/Getty Images

Japan, the only G7 country along with the US to retain capital punishment, has drawn international criticism of its "secret" executions. Campaigners have used Hakamada's case to accuse Japanese authorities of driving prisoners insane and subjecting them to "cruel, inhuman and degrading" treatment.

Death row inmates are notified only on the morning of their execution, and their families are typically informed after the execution has taken place. Hakamada reportedly spent much of his time on death row in solitary confinement.

Groups opposed to the death penalty welcomed the high court's decision and said the retrial should take place while Hakamada, now in poor health, was still able to take part in hearings.

"This ruling presents a long overdue chance to deliver some justice to Iwao Hakamada, who has spent more than half a century under sentence of death despite the blatant unfairness of the trial that saw him convicted," Hideaki Nakagawa, the director of Amnesty International Japan, said.

"Hakamada's conviction was based on a forced 'confession' and there are serious doubts about the other evidence used against him. Yet at the age of 87, he has still not been given the opportunity to challenge the verdict that has kept him under the constant threat of the gallows for most of his life.

"Now that the Tokyo high court has acknowledged Hakamada's right to the fair trial he was denied more than 50 years ago, it is imperative that prosecutors allow this to happen."

Hakamada was a live-in employee at a miso manufacturer when he was arrested in 1966 for robbing and murdering the firm's managing director, his wife and their two teenage children. The victims had been stabbed to death and their home in Shizuoka, central Japan, burned down.

Hakamada, who has been out on "temporary release" since 2014 on humanitarian grounds, initially denied the allegations but later confessed, subsequently claiming that police had threatened and assaulted him during 20 days of interrogation.

The Shizuoka district court granted a retrial in 2014, saying investigators could have planted evidence after DNA tests proved that blood found on several items of clothing was not Hakamada's.

The Tokyo high court overturned that ruling four years later, however, and the case was sent to the supreme court, which in 2020 ordered the high court to reconsider its decision.

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A performance of Naatu Naatu at the Oscars ceremony on Sunday. The track from Indian film RRR won the Academy Award for best original song. Photograph: Chris Pizzello/Invision/AP

India

‘Elated and proud’: India erupts with joy after historic Oscar wins

Oscars for song Naatu Naatu and documentary short film The Elephant Whisperers triggers wave of pride across India

Amrit Dhillon in Delhi
Mon 13 Mar 2023 02.55 EDTLast modified on Wed 15 Mar 2023 09.23 EDT

Indians have been celebrating their historic double win at the Oscars as the moment their country found the global recognition it has craved for years.

The rollicking song Naatu Naatu from the film RRR won best original song – it was also performed live at the ceremony in Los Angeles on Sunday

night – and the Elephant Whisperers won best documentary short film.

The euphoria across social media and in public stems from the fact that India has traditionally not fared well at the Academy Awards, despite numerous nominations over the years. No Indian film has ever won a best film Oscar. Naatu Naatu is the first song from an Indian film to win an Oscar.

"It's just the beginning of everything," composer M.M. Keeravani said backstage at the ceremony. "For the world, particularly the western world, folks are more on India and Asian music. It's just long due. I feel very happy to open doors and the world to embrace my culture."

Indian film and music lovers expressed their jubilation on social media, while political leaders from across the spectrum tweeted their pride.

Prime minister Narendra Modi tweeted: "Exceptional! The popularity of 'Naatu Naatu' is global. It will be a song that will be remembered for years to come … India is elated and proud."

Opposition Congress Party president Mallikarjan Kharge tweeted: "We join millions of Indians in rejoicing at the great news … Thank you for bringing so much joy and happiness to India'.

> Exceptional!
>
> The popularity of 'Naatu Naatu' is global. It will be a song that will be remembered for years to come. Congratulations to @mmkeeravaani, @boselyricist and the entire team for this prestigious honour.
>
> India is elated and proud. #Oscars https://t.co/cANG5wHROt
>
> — Narendra Modi (@narendramodi) March 13, 2023

The Elephant Whisperers is a tender portrait of a poor couple in Tamil Nadu and their strong bond with a baby elephant called Raghu. Made by two

women, Kartiki Gonsalves and Guneet Monga, the documentary shows the mutual understanding between the couple and the orphaned calf in their care.

In an Instagram post, Gonsalves said: “Tonight is historic as this is the first ever Oscar for an Indian production.”

The performance of Naatu Naatu is only the second time an Indian song has been performed at the Oscars. The first time was the song Jai Ho from the film Slumdog Millionaire in 2009.

Naatu Naatu is the centrepiece of RRR, the hit epic action drama directed by south Indian director SS Rajamouli.

RRR, short for Rise, Roar, Revolt, is a story of two Indian men who forge a friendship in the 1920s to fight British rule, in particular, a ‘villainous’ governor and his equally nasty wife.

The film instantly became a massive hit after its release last year. Made on a budget of US$72m, it is the most expensive Indian film to date.

The foot tapping Naatu Naatu was filmed at Mariinskyi Palace, the official residence of Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelenksiy in Kyiv a few months before the Russian invasion.

The song’s awards momentum has been building up for months. In January, it won the best original song award at the Golden Globes.

Film critic L Ravichander told India’s NDTV news channel that the song’s success was propelled by the film-makers’ ‘faith in themselves’.

“They were so confident that they went to Hollywood as equals and had the self-belief to enter into the lobbying that has to be done in Hollywood,” he said.

Oscars 2023 highlights: Everything Everywhere All at Once sweeps Oscars – video

Indians noted that RRR was not, as many people abroad might assume, a Bollywood film but a south Indian film in the Telugu language. Film critics

said they hoped that regional Indian cinema would start being recognised instead of the film industry being synonymous with Bollywood.

Naatu Naatu has been viewed 125m times on YouTube and Indians are hoping its success may give them a ‘Gangnam Style’ moment in popular culture.

Film analyst Komal Nahta called the song ‘phenomenal’ and said it richly deserved the Oscar. “After Jai Ho, this is a song that’s transcended international boundaries to become hugely popular,” he said.

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China's National People's Congress has ended after a week in which allies of president Xi Jinping were elevated to key government positions. Photograph: Mark R Cristino/EPA

Xi Jinping

Xi Jinping vows to oppose Taiwan 'pro-independence' influences as third term begins

Chinese president lays out priorities, including 'reunification' with island that Communist party has never ruled, as National People's Congress ends

Rhoda Kwan and agencies
Mon 13 Mar 2023 00.45 EDTFirst published on Sun 12 Mar 2023 21.59 EDT

Xi Jinping has stressed the need to oppose "pro-independence" influences in Taiwan, as he closed the National People's Congress (NPC) after a week in which the rubber-stamp parliament handed China's president an

unprecedented third presidential term, and key roles at the top of the government were reshuffled.

Xi closed the session with a speech to the gathered delegates. On Friday he secured his place as China's most powerful leader in generations in a carefully choreographed ceremony in Beijing.

In his speech on Monday laying out his priorities for China, Xi described the need for "national reunification" as the "essence of national rejuvenation", casting the issue of Taiwan's relationship with China as a focus of the new political term.

"We should actively oppose the external forces and secessionist activities of Taiwan independence. We should unswervingly advance the cause of national rejuvenation and reunification," Xi said, to loud applause. Xi, who has previously not ruled out the use of force against Taiwan, stressed the need to "promote peaceful development of cross-strait relations".

The Chinese Communist party has never governed Taiwan, a self-ruled democracy, but regards it as a renegade province that it must "reunify" with the mainland, by force if necessary. Xi has increasingly prioritised China's claim to Taiwan, casting it as a historical imperative amid spiralling tensions with the US.

Xi on Monday stressed the need to bolster the military, making it a "great wall of steel" to protect China's sovereignty and national interests.

He also called for greater economic self-reliance and the need to coordinate development and security. "Security is the foundation for development. Stability is the foundation for prosperity."

On Saturday, Li Qiang, a longtime Xi ally, was promoted to premier, the second most powerful position in the Chinese Communist party. The former Shanghai Communist party boss replaced Li Keqiang who stepped down after two five-year terms.

Li Qiang, now charged with rebuilding China's economy after three years of Covid restrictions, sought to inspire business confidence on Monday.

Entrepreneurs and businesses in China would be given space and ample opportunities to develop in a rules-based environment and a “culture of respect”, the premier told reporters during his first media briefing.

The party in recent years has cracked down on tech companies, in a bid to assert control over China’s largest enterprises and business elite.

Li also singled out the US for criticism, echoing a speech from president Xi last week in which he condemned US-led “suppression of China”.

“China and the United States should cooperate, and must cooperate. When China and the US work together, there is much we can achieve,” Li said, adding: “Encirclement and suppression are not advantageous for anyone.”

Across the slate of other appointments, there were fewer changes than anticipated, with most cabinet ministers keeping their posts.

Xi has been installing allies in key roles in the government reshuffle, but broke with convention to retain Yi Gang as governor of the People’s Bank of China (PBOC) and Liu Kun as finance minister. Both men have reached, or passed, the official retirement age of 65.

“Opting for continuity in these critical economic roles suggests an emphasis on credibility and stability,” said Mattie Bekink, China director at the Economist Intelligence Corporate Network.

“It is also perhaps a tacit acknowledgment of some of the challenges for Beijing at the moment,” she said. “The real challenge for this third Xi administration is whether it will address structural imbalances in China’s economy and undertake reforms necessary to ensure China’s long-term competitiveness.”

The government has set a 2023 economic growth target of about 5%, up from 3% last year, which was among the weakest performances in decades.

Reuters contributed to this report

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Kenzaburo Oe was scarred by his memories of the second world war. Photograph: Auad/Alamy

Books

Kenzaburo Oe, Nobel prize-winning Japanese writer, dies aged 88

Fiction and essays tackled subjects including militarism and nuclear disarmament, innocence and trauma

Sian Cain
@siancain
Mon 13 Mar 2023 05.07 EDTFirst published on Mon 13 Mar 2023 04.39 EDT

Kenzaburo Oe, a giant of Japanese writing and winner of the Nobel prize in literature, has died aged 88.

Spanning fiction and essays, Oe's work tackled a wide range of subjects from militarism and nuclear disarmament to innocence and trauma, and he

became an outspoken champion for the voiceless in the face of what he regarded as his country's failures. Regarded by some in Japan as distinctly western, Oe's style was often likened to William Faulkner; in his own words, in his writing he would "start from my personal matters and then link it up with society, the state and the world".

Many of his stories and essays touched on formative events in his life, including the impact of war on Japanese society in novels such as The Silent Cry – which the Nobel committee deemed his masterpiece – and the birth of his son Hikari, which led him to explore his own experience as the father of a disabled child in the novels A Personal Matter and A Quiet Life.

Oe's death, on 3 March, was due to old age, his publisher Kodansha said.

Henry Miller once likened Oe to Dostoevsky, in his "range of hope and despair", while Edward Said, a friend for 20 years, noted his "extraordinary power of sympathetic understanding". Fellow laureate Kazuo Ishiguro once described him as "genuinely decent, modest, surprisingly open and honest, and very unconcerned about fame", while his translator, John Nathan, credited him with "creating a language of his own, in the manner of Faulkner and few Japanese writers before him".

Born in 1935 in Ose, a remote village in the forests of Shikoku, Oe was the fifth of seven children, growing up on the folk tales of his grandmother and mother. When Oe's father was killed in the second world war in 1944, his mother began to educate him with books including The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn and The Wonderful Adventures of Nils Holgersson, the impact of which, he said in his 1994 Nobel acceptance speech, he would "carry to the grave".

Raised believing that the emperor of Japan was a living god, Oe was shocked at the age of 10 when he first heard the voice of Emperor Hirohito, as he surrendered after the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. All of his beliefs were upturned. "But for my experiences of 1945 and the subsequent years, I would never have become a novelist," he would later say.

Postwar currency reform drove his family, wholesalers of banknote paper, into precarity. Oe was the only one of his siblings to go to university, studying French and becoming a journalist. He began publishing fiction in 1957, and within a year his novella Shiiku *(*The Catch), about a friendship between a Japanese child and a black American PoW, won Oe the Akutagawa prize at the age of 23. His first novel, Memushiri Kouchi (Nip the Buds, Shoot the Kids), also published in 1958, follows a group of juvenile delinquents evacuated to a village in wartime who are then abandoned by the villagers.

Oe became increasingly political, demonstrating against the renewal of Japan's security treaty with the US, the Vietnam war and even marching in Paris in 1961 with Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir against the Algerian war. He rapidly became a cult writer among Japan's postwar youth, voicing their anger at the country's government. He told the Paris Review in 2007 that he considered himself an anarchist: "Kurt Vonnegut once said he was an agnostic who respects Jesus Christ. I am an anarchist who loves democracy."

Influenced by Sartre and American literature, Oe created many disfranchised and grotesque antiheroes. Japanese critics scoffed that his writing "reeked of butter", having been sullied by western syntax, and he became a target of Japanese conservatives for his criticism of the emperor, and for his depiction of Japan as pathetic and subservient in several sexually explicit stories. After the publication of Sevuntiin *(*Seventeen), his 1961 novel inspired by the real assassination of Japan's socialist party chairman the year before, he received death threats and was physically assaulted while lecturing at the University of Tokyo. His 1970 essay Okinawa Notes, in which he detailed how the Japanese military had convinced Okinawan civilians to kill themselves as the allies invaded in 1945, resulted in him being sued in 2005 by two retired officers; three years later, all charges against Oe were dismissed. His 1972 novel The Day He Shall Wipe My Tears Away was a satire of patriotic excess, published just two years after the Japanese novelist Yukio Mishima famously performed seppuku after leading a failed coup.

In 1960 Oe married his wife, Yukari. Three years later their first child, Hikari, was born with a herniated brain and doctors urged the parents to let him die. Oe admitted to once wishing for his son's death – a "disgraceful"

thought, he later wrote, that “no powerful detergent has allowed me to wash out of my life”. But encounters with survivors of Hiroshima a month later were transformative, and led to his essay Hiroshima Notes. “I was trained as a writer and as a human being by the birth of my son,” he told the Guardian in 2005. Hikari went on to become a musical prodigy and an award-winning composer, with Oe saying his music sold “better than any of my novels, and I’m proud of that”.

Oe wrote many fictional fathers with disabled sons, in books such as A Personal Matter, The Silent Cry and A Quiet Life, which was adapted for cinema by Oe’s brother-in-law, the director Juzo Itami, with a score based on Hikari’s compositions. In 1995, he wrote a bestselling essay collection, A Healing Family, in which he credited Hikari for teaching him the healing power of art. He rejected accusations that he had exploited his son by writing about him so frankly: “Our relationship is a real one. It’s the most important thing: life comes first, and literature second … I’m always happy to be with him. I can be very lonely and fearful of people. But with my son I’m very free.”

In the early 1990s, Oe vowed to stop writing fiction, saying Hikari had now found his own voice, and that the three books in his The Flaming Green Tree trilogy signalled his career coming full circle. But winning the Nobel prize in 1994 changed his mind. Just days later, he refused Japan’s Order of Culture on the grounds that he refused to “recognise any authority, any value, higher than democracy”. This scandalised Japan, and he received death threats.

Oe continued to write into his late 70s, with his final book, Bannen Youshiki shū (In Reito Sutairu) (In Late Style) published in 2013. He continued to speak out against war, nuclear power and the revival of Japanese nationalism, urging official compensation for the wartime Korean sex slaves known as “comfort women”, and called for Japan to focus on reconciling with its neighbours in Asia. “History must be looked at again. If Japan thinks trade and prosperity are enough, that would be totally wrong,” he told the Guardian in 2005. “I would like to live to see a final reconciliation between Japan, and China and Korea.”

- This article was amended on 14 March 2023, to correct the gender of Juzo Itami.

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Headlines thursday 16 march 2023

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- **Budget Labour promises to reverse Jeremy Hunt’s pensions giveaway for richest 1%**
- **Resolution Foundation UK on track for ‘disastrous decade’ of income stagnation**
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Jeremy Hunt displays the red budget briefcase in Downing Street, London. Photograph: Tejas Sandhu/Sopa/Rex/Shutterstock

Budget 2023

Jeremy Hunt defends pensions giveaway as Labour vows to scrap it

Shadow chancellor says decision to axe lifetime allowance is ‘wrong priority at the wrong time for the wrong people’

- Budget 2023: key points at a glance
- What the budget means for people on a range of incomes

Alexandra Topping
Thu 16 Mar 2023 06.59 EDTFirst published on Thu 16 Mar 2023 04.20 EDT

The Labour party has vowed to reverse the chancellor’s £1bn budget pensions tax “gilded giveaway” for the wealthiest 1% if it wins the next

general election, as Jeremy Hunt defended his decision to scrap the lifetime pensions allowance.

The shadow chancellor, Rachel Reeves, said Labour would seek to force a Commons vote next week on the decision, which critics argue will allow the wealthiest people to put a limitless amount into their pension pots, which can then be passed on to their heirs without paying inheritance tax.

In his budget on Wednesday, Hunt said the measure would prevent medical consultants retiring early from the NHS because the current pension rules meant it was not worth them carrying on working.

The Office for Budget Responsibility has estimated that – combined with an increase in the pensions annual tax-free allowance, from £40,000 to £60,000 – it will increase employment by 15,000 workers.

But Reeves said a Labour government would reinstate the lifetime allowance and create a targeted scheme for doctors rather than allowing a "free-for-all for the wealthy few".

She added: "At a time when families across the country face rising bills, higher costs and frozen wages, this gilded giveaway is the wrong priority at the wrong time for the wrong people.

"That's why a Labour government will reverse this move. We urge the chancellor and the Conservative government to think again."

Responding to the criticism on Thursday, Hunt accused Labour of shifting their position "overnight". He argued that the shadow health secretary, Wes Streeting, had called for the cap on pensions to be lifted last September.

"He seems to have changed his mind overnight on that one. He said it was crazy and it would save lives to get rid of that cap," said Hunt. "Well, he was right in September when he said that."

Streeting countered on Twitter that Labour had called "for action on DOCTORS' pensions", not "a massive bung to the richest costing £835

MILLION A YEAR”.

Asked on Sky News whether the NHS needed more nurses rather than consultants earning more than £100,000, Hunt said: “We need more nurses and we are recruiting many more nurses into the NHS. But yes, I think if you talk to anyone in the NHS, they will say doctors leaving the workforce because of pension rules is a big problem.”

Speaking on BBC Radio 4’s Today programme, Hunt was asked if it displayed the wrong values to give a large tax break to the very rich. He responded: “There are many doctors who are worried about hitting their pension cap who are deterred from taking on extra hours. So it’s not just the numbers who actually do hit the pension cap, but I don’t think it is the wrong values to support our NHS.”

Dr Vishal Sharma, a cardiologist and British Medical Association pensions committee chair, said the tax break would make a difference to the number of staff leaving the NHS.

Sharma told BBC Breakfast the number of hospital consultants who had taken early retirement had tripled, while the number of GPs had quadrupled in the past decade.

“We are heading towards a sort of precipice where huge numbers were going to go unless things changed. So it’s welcome that the chancellor’s listened to our concerns and has actually taken some decisive action,” he said.

2023 budget: Jeremy Hunt overhauls childcare, pensions and disability benefits – video highlights

However, Torsten Bell, the chief executive of the Resolution Foundation thinktank, said the chancellor had “basically ignored” public services, leaving them facing “implausibly tight spending plans” while giving handouts to the richest. “The more you think about this policy, the worse it is,” he said.

Hunt argued that the budget did more for parents of young children than older voters, pointing to changes to childcare that will give 30 hours free to

working parents of under-5s from September 2025. “This is the biggest transformation in childcare in my lifetime,” the chancellor told Sky News.

Hunt was asked on the Today programme whether the plans amounted to “jam for the day after tomorrow”, as they would not begin in full for all under-5s until September 2025, while an “ambition” to provide more wraparound care for children in schools would be implemented in 2026.

Hunt said it was a “huge investment” of about £5bn a year and “the biggest expansion of childcare in my lifetime”.

“That’s going to mean that we’re going to need a lot of extra childminders, a lot of extra nursery places. A lot of extra support in schools for the wraparound offer,” he said. “We recognise that if you’re making as ambitious a change as this, that it’s going to take time and that’s why we need to bring it in in stages.”

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2023 budget: Jeremy Hunt overhauls childcare, pensions and disability benefits – video highlights

Budget 2023

Budget: UK on track for ‘disastrous decade’ of income stagnation

Thinktank says taxes as share of GDP are on course to reach 70-year high but public services are being cut

- **Budget 2023: key points at a glance**

Phillip Inman
@phillipinman
Thu 16 Mar 2023 07.31 EDTFirst published on Thu 16 Mar 2023 03.24 EDT

The UK remains on track for a “disastrous decade” of stagnant incomes and high taxes, despite cuts to public services, the Resolution Foundation has said in its analysis of the budget on Wednesday.

The thinktank, whose stated aim is to improve the standard of living for low- and middle-income families, said typical household disposable incomes were on course to be lower by the end of the forecast period in 2027-28 than they were before the pandemic, when inflation was taken into account.

While the chancellor, Jeremy Hunt, had announced an “impressively broad suite of policies” to encourage more people into work, he was unable to change the course of declining living standards, the foundation said.

“Britain’s economy remains stuck in a deep funk – with people supported into work but getting poorer, and paying more tax but seeing public services cut,” the report said.

The UK is forecast to have gone through "the biggest energy and inflation shock since the 1970s, while avoiding a recession, with unemployment peaking at just 4.4%", it added.

The thinktank said taxes as a share of gross national product were on track to hit 37.7% by the end of the forecast, a 70-year high and a 4.7 percentage point increase since 2019-20, the equivalent to nearly an extra £4,200 for every UK household.

Workers also face paying more to the Treasury because personal tax thresholds have been frozen instead of rising with inflation, meaning wage growth pushes more people into higher rate bands – a phenomenon known as "fiscal drag".

The Treasury's independent forecaster, the Office for Budget Responsibility, said wages growth over the next five years would force 3.2 million people to pay tax for the first time, put 2.1 million into the higher-rate tax band, and add 350,000 additional-rate taxpayers.

The extra amount paid will rise steadily until 2027-28, by which point the government will be earning £29.3bn a year more in extra income tax.

The rise in taxes will still leave the chancellor with little room for manoeuvre at the end of the OBR's five-year forecast period, mainly because a short-term lift in GDP growth will fade, leaving the overall tax rate lower.

"If even the slow growth of the past decade had continued, incomes would still be £1,800 higher than currently projected for 2027-28," the Resolution Foundation said.

It described Hunt's move to abolish the lifetime limit on tax-free pension savings as a very large boost to the wealthy – saving someone with a £2m pension pot almost £250,000 in tax.

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The government argues the move, along with the increase in the tax-free annual savings limit from £40,000 to £60,000, are needed to prevent older NHS doctors from quitting work or cutting back their hours. The change is expected to discourage 15,000 higher earners from retiring early. But the foundation said it could have the opposite effect and allow the better-off to build pension pots so large they would still make an early exit.

Intense cost pressure on public services from stagnant budget allocations and rising inflation were “largely ignored” in the budget, the thinktank said, adding that Whitehall departments outside the protected areas of health, schools and defence faced 10% cuts in real terms to day-to-day spending per head by 2027-28.

This loss of spending power across most government departments will rise to 14% “if the newly announced aspiration for defence spending to rise to 2.5% of GDP is met over the next parliament”.

An increase in investment allowances to encourage businesses to buy IT and new equipment worth up to £28bn over three years represents the fifth major corporate tax change in just two years, “illustrating the lack of certainty that has frustrated businesses”, the report said.

The foundation calculated the policy would deliver a temporary 3% boost to investment, “when what Britain actually needs is a permanent 30% boost to catch up with our competitors in France, Germany and the US”.

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Budget 2023: what it means for people on a range of incomes

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2023.03.16 - Spotlight

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- **The long read The stupidity of AI**
- **'I felt seriously cheated' Djimon Hounsou on the Oscars, poor pay days, stardom and struggle**
- **Dormant volcanoes and working monorails The grand designs of Ken Adam, master of the Bond-villain lair**



The US actor Steven Seagal at the congress of the International Russophile Movement in Moscow. Photograph: Evgenia Novozhenina/Reuters

Russia

Italian princess, conspiracy theorists and Steven Seagal: meet Russia's friends overseas

'I am 100% Russophile' declares US actor at meeting of International Movement of Russophiles in Moscow



Andrew Roth in Moscow
Thu 16 Mar 2023 01.00 EDTLast modified on Thu 16 Mar 2023 07.51 EDT

Who are Russia's friends abroad now? Judging by a recent congress of the International Movement of Russophiles, an event put together by conservative activists and held with great fanfare at a glass-enclosed hall at the Pushkin State Museum in Moscow, the answer is political marginals and conspiracy theorists.

Among them were the contentious American actor Steven Seagal, a grandson of Charles de Gaulle, and an Italian princess and scholar known for her Tolkien translations who fears European boys are being encouraged to marry their cows.

"I'm here to promote peace and friendship and I do believe that this conflict has been provoked and caused by Anglo-Saxon interests … I think it's putting the world into deep danger, and I'm here to fight against that," said Pierre de Gaulle, the French general's grandson and a speaker at the conference, in an interview with the Guardian.

The younger de Gaulle has already attracted controversy. Last month, he told a French newspaper, Le Parisien, that the west had "unfortunately let

[Volodymyr] Zelenskiy, his oligarchs and neo-Nazi military groups lock themselves into a spiral of war."

Yves de Gaulle, Pierre's older brother, told Le Parisien on 24 January his brother's views "concern nobody other than himself – not me, not our family and even less the general".

Pierre de Gaulle did not comment on his brother's remarks and sidestepped a question on whether his family name might be used to legitimise the war in Ukraine as De Gaulle had proudly invoked his grandfather when asked on stage about the conflict.

"My grandfather had a very deep knowledge and intense knowledge about Russian leaders and people as well," he told the conference. "So he was pretty aware of the interest, and the geographical necessity for Europe and France to ally with Russia.

"More and more people are becoming aware that this conflict was created to break the single bloc of Europe, to the benefit of the Americans," he said.



The Russian foreign minister, Sergei Lavrov, gave a keynote speech. Photograph: Alexander Zemlianichenko/AP

It may also prove a lucrative opportunity. As a banker, he added, he was looking to find people of a “different opinion who have a different view for peace”, including those looking for “financial contracts, investment contracts”.

Europeans are in short supply when it comes to Russian propaganda and media outlets looking for foreign support for the war against Ukraine. But this week 90 delegates, including many conspiracy theorists, gathered willing to parrot the Moscow line.

Nikolay Malinov, a former member of the Bulgarian parliament who is now under US sanctions, opened the event saying it was time for the “forces of light to defeat the forces of darkness”.

On stage, dressed in black, was Steven Seagal, who has been named a special representative for Russia-US cultural links. “I am 100% Russophile and 1 million % Russian,” Seagal said during a press conference.

Sergei Lavrov, the Russian foreign minister, was also there, giving what would be seen as a fringe event an official imprimatur. He delivered a keynote speech along with a missive from Vladimir Putin. “We are not just seeing neo-nazism, we are seeing direct nazism, which is covering more and more European countries,” said Lavrov. “We see how history is being destroyed before our eyes, holy monuments are being destroyed.”

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Among those on stage, Princess Vittoria Alliata di Villafranca stood out, a woman in her 70s with bright red hair, perhaps best known in Italy as the first translator into Italian of Tolkien. She claims she fought Opus Dei and the mafia in order to reclaim her family palace in Bagheria, where she said movie producers were filming a modern remake of Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa's novel The Leopard.

In a speech she said that "Russophobia" was created for "new formulas of colonisation" and linked it to the US landing on Sicily during the second world war, which she called a pretext for Washington's spread of influence.

Alliata said that she was at the conference representing the Deutsch-Arabaische Gesellschaft (German Arab Association), of which she is president, and said she was advocating a "message of peace."

Asked how she came to be in Russia for a conference of Russophiles, she also said she was visiting the Russian royal family. "I am a cousin of the Romanovs," she said, referring to the descendants of the last royal family of the Russian empire. "I know them very well, I came to the wedding … So it's a tsarist connection."

She said she was in Russia to show "there are other people in the world that share your opinion and view on the world … and that makes it easier for a village lady in Sicily who looks at some dismay at her son who wants to get married to a cow."

She sought to avoid the subject of the war. Asked about it directly, she said: "I'm not an expert on that subject."

"It's my duty to explain how things stand," she added about her speech. "It's nothing to do with personal sympathies. I find Putin nicer than Biden, but I'm a great friend of Obama's stepsister."

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The stupidity of AI

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‘The dream was just so big’ … Djimon Hounsou photographed in London this month. Photograph: Yves Salmon/The Guardian

Movies

Interview

‘I felt seriously cheated’: Djimon Hounsou on the Oscars, poor pay days, stardom and struggle

Chris Godfrey

From sleeping rough in Paris to being cast as a slave three times in five years, the Shazam! star is no stranger to hardship. Will Hollywood finally give him the great roles he so clearly deserves?



Thu 16 Mar 2023 02.00 EDTLast modified on Thu 16 Mar 2023 07.51 EDT

The extraordinary story of Djimon Hounsou began in the 70s with a weekly hunt for five empty Omo detergent sacks. The prize on offer: one free ticket at the local cinema in Cotonou, Benin. The recycling scheme made the cinema the place to be every Wednesday, when Hounsou and his schoolmates had the afternoon off, so tracking down the packages was a priority: asking family, door-knocking neighbours and riffling through rubbish. Regardless, every Wednesday afternoon, the cinema was rammed.

“You’d have the theatre packed all the way to the bathroom; all kids,” says Hounsou. “I remember vividly: sometimes you would be in the back of the

theatre and you couldn't see the screen. But you could hear it. These were cowboy films coming from America and all you could hear were the shoes and the spurs. The sounds were like a dagger; it really pierced your inspiration."

Hounsou began to dream of becoming an actor. "The dream was just so big that I went all the way to America and forgot that I didn't speak English!" he says.

'The DC universe has a level of respect' … watch the trailer for Shazam! Fury of the Gods.

Today, Hounsou's dream has brought him to London to discuss his latest role, the Wizard in DC's latest superhero instalment, Shazam! Fury of the Gods. He is 58, but his distinguished, grey goatee is the only mark of ageing. He sits on the sofa with almost regal poise, hands clasped in his lap. Before we start, he pulls the recorder closer; he speaks with a soft, low rumble, at times barely a whisper.

For Hounsou, realising his dream has been a constant struggle. His story wouldn't be out of place on the silver screen, moving from his family home in Benin to living on the streets of Paris to becoming the first Black African actor to be nominated for an Academy Award. He has been a fixture of critically acclaimed dramas and big-budget blockbusters for more than 25 years, but there is the feeling that in a different, more open, era of film-making, he might have gone even further.

Hounsou describes his early life as "not the best childhood you could wish for a young man". The youngest of five siblings, he was an introvert, but embraced the escapism of performing in school plays, all the while keeping his grander thespian ambitions hidden from a family with more middle-class aspirations.

Early on, his mother and father, both cooks, moved to Ivory Coast for work, leaving one of Hounsou's brothers to raise him. At 12, it was decided that Hounsou would go to Lyon, France, to live with his older brother Edmond, who had become a French citizen. "It's a different environment that taught

me so much, but it also ripped me apart," he says. "I was extremely lonely. There was nobody I could connect to. You're in a completely foreign environment, an environment that is seen to not care much for your kind."

His brother was "just barely surviving"; Hounsou, who had obtained a student visa, was often left on his own. "We ended up living in a room half the size of this" – we are sitting in a modest hotel room – "just with a narrow bed and no shower and no bathroom."



'I didn't feel like I belonged in that world' … Hounsou on the catwalk in 1995. Photograph: David Turner/Penske Media/Getty Images

By 19, Hounsou knew he was never going to work in an office – he wanted to make movies, or at the very least get into professional boxing, his second passion. He told his brother he was going to leave school. "Long story short, he reported back home to our parents."

Hounsou was ordered to return to Benin (his parents had since moved back) for a dressing down. He did, but made sure to get a return ticket. "I got off the plane and I could see the face of my mum and I was like: ooh, this is about to be a rough three months!" he says. "They were just really mad and disappointed that they sent their son all the way to Europe, to white-men

country, and I came home with some fucked-up ideas about being a boxer or making movies."

They also weren't happy about him insisting on going back to Lyon. "I really had to stand my ground and challenge anybody to come and get the return ticket off me." When he did return, his boxing hopes were quickly extinguished after he endured a few knockouts. His relationship with his brother soured and he was kicked out of the apartment.

Hounsou didn't hang around. He moved to Paris, but acting work was hard to come by ("I felt the racism was quite heavy out there back then"). Before long, his student visa had expired. "Not only am I homeless, but I'm also illegal," he says. "It was almost impossible to live and to find a job in France at the time. So that's how I ended up on the streets."

He slept on park benches. During the day, he would ride the Métro for warmth, or hang out by the Pompidou centre, sleeping in its library. One day, while in the adjacent square, he was approached by "a very feminine gentleman, who was like: 'Oh, you have a cool look; I have a friend who's a photographer who's looking for really cool faces,'" says Hounsou. He took the man's card, but he didn't have the money to make the call. He was worried about the man's motives, but, when he came back, "the desperate need to eat or to be in a warm shelter made me follow him".

The man's offer was legitimate. A shoot was organised the same day; within the week, he was auditioning to be a model in front of the legendary designer Thierry Mugler.

> My dream was just so big that I went all the way to America and forgot that I didn't speak English

"He immediately saw me and was like: 'This is who we're looking for. This is the man.'" It was an alien, stressful environment. Mugler's assistant took pictures of Hounsou in different outfits, including some leather underwear.

Did he feel uncomfortable? "Oh, for sure, I was very uncomfortable and not sure if this was a disservice to my manhood," he says. "But at the same time,

certainly, Thierry Mugler could feel I was very timid about this setting and was a gentleman who put me at ease."

Hounsou enjoyed success as a model in Paris. After 18 months of being homeless, sleeping rough even during his first few jobs, he finally secured an apartment. As well as Mugler, he collaborated with the likes of Iman, Naomi Campbell and the celebrated photographer Herb Ritts. But it wasn't his passion. "I certainly didn't feel like I belonged in that world," he says. So, at 22, he moved to Los Angeles, despite his limited English.

"All I knew how to say was: yes, hello, good morning, thank you, yes sir," he says. A visiting friend mocked his Hollywood ambitions. "'Acting? But you realise you don't speak the language?' For somebody else to point it out was like a slap in my face," he says. "I was so hurt; from that point on, I refused to tell anybody my dreams."

Undeterred, Hounsou continued modelling in LA and taking parts in commercials, to make enough money to pay for his acting and diction classes. He landed roles dancing in music videos for Janet Jackson, Paula Abdul and Madonna, as well as picking up small film roles.

Then came his audition for Amistad, Steven Spielberg's 1997 historical drama about an uprising on a 19th-century slave ship. The casting director asked if he spoke any African languages. He did: his mother tongue, Goun. He was asked to deliver the audition in it. "I was taken aback, because I had spent so much time trying to articulate this in English."

Later, he was called in to meet Spielberg. "And I was like: 'Whoa, what the fuck!' And my life changed dramatically after that."

Amistad was Hounsou's Hollywood calling card. The New York Times said his performance gave the film "a strong visual focus as he radiates extraordinary presence and fury". But despite the widespread acclaim, one body that failed to notice his performance was the Academy. His co-star, Anthony Hopkins, was nominated for best supporting actor, but Hounsou was overlooked.

That must have been infuriating, I say. “Yeah. Maybe I was early. If my movies had come out today I definitely would have gotten an Oscar already,” he says.



‘My life changed dramatically after that’ … in Amistad. Photograph: Cinetext Bildarchiv/Dreamworks/Allstar

Hounsou was at least nominated for his later performances in In America (2002) and Blood Diamond (2006), although in the latter Leonardo DiCaprio received a nomination for best actor while Hounsou had to make do with a nod for best supporting actor, despite the film focusing on his character’s story.

“I felt seriously cheated,” he says. “Today, we talk so much about the Oscars being so white, but I remember there was a time where I had no support at all: no support from my own people, no support from the media, from the industry itself. It felt like: ‘You should be happy that you’ve got nominated,’ and that’s that.”

He was frustrated with the limited parts Black actors were being offered. He played a slave three times in five years (in Amistad, Gladiator and The Four Feathers). Does he still find the industry limiting?

"I'm still struggling to try to make a dollar!" he says. "I've come up in the business with some people who are absolutely well off and have very little of my accolades. So I feel cheated, tremendously cheated, in terms of finances and in terms of the workload as well.



'I felt seriously cheated' … with Leonardo DiCaprio in Blood Diamond. Photograph: Pictorial Press/Alamy

"I've gone to studios for meetings and they're like: 'Wow, we felt like you just got off the boat and then went back [after Amistad]. We didn't know you were here as a true actor.' When you hear things like that, you can see that some people's vision of you, or what you represent, is very limiting. But it is what it is. It's up to me to redeem that."

Hounsou lives in Atlanta with his partner Ri'Za and his one-year-old son, Fela (he has another son from a previous relationship). Since Blood Diamond in 2006, he has mostly played bit parts, sidekicks and henchmen in various action and superhero franchises, including Marvel, DC, Kingsman and Fast & Furious.

It is not how he would want it. The reason for taking so many smaller roles, he says, is to assert himself as a "man of today" and "to prove that I can speak the language. I may not speak perfectly like an American with an

American accent, but I don’t need to be all-American,” he says, slipping into a pretty good all-American accent.

It must be particularly aggravating, considering how hard he has worked just to get his foot in the door. “I still have to prove why I need to get paid,” he agrees. “They always come at me with a complete low ball: ‘We only have this much for the role, but we love you so much and we really think you can bring so much.’”


‘I’m still struggling to try to make a dollar’ … with Russell Crowe in Gladiator. Photograph: Dreamworks/Sportsphoto/Allstar

“Viola Davis said it beautifully: she’s won an Oscar, she’s won an Emmy, she’s won a Tony and she still can’t get paid. [She added a Grammy in February.] Film after film, it’s a struggle. I have yet to meet the film that paid me fairly.”

But there are positives on the horizon. He is crossing his fingers for a part in the Gladiator sequel, while he was given far more screen time in the Shazam! sequel – in the kind of comedic role he has rarely been given. “Out of them all, the DC universe has a level of respect,” he says. “There wasn’t much to the role at first and I did it and it was fun. But the second time around it was a little more respectful.”

Finally, Hollywood is starting to value him. “From time to time, they themselves make the point of saying: ‘We should give him more, he’s a little underappreciated.’ I think they recognise that themselves,” he says, before brushing it off. “Hey, it’s the struggle I have to overcome!” Considering what Hounsou has already overcome, you would be foolish to bet against him.

Shazam! Fury of the Gods is in UK cinemas from 17 March

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from https://www.theguardian.com/film/2023/mar/16/i-felt-seriously-cheated-djimon-hounsou-on-the-oscars-poor-pay-days-stardom-and-struggle



James Bond fights Blofeld's bodyguard Hans in the elaborate villain's lair, in You Only Live Twice. Photograph: © 1967 Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Studios Inc. and Danjaq LLC. All rights reserved

Books

Dormant volcanoes and working monorails: the grand designs of Ken Adam, master of the Bond-villain lair

A new book celebrates the late production designer whose elaborate concepts for films from Bond to Dr Strangelove influenced the likes of Norman Foster – and it all started with a felt-tip



Oliver Wainwright
@ollywainwright

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Villains hiding out in underground lairs, councils of war meeting at spotlit circular tables, bank vaults full of gold bullion piled high. The popular imagination of what these secret, off-limits places might look like has been shaped, more than anything else, by the dramatic visions of the late production designer Ken Adam.

As the creative mind behind seven James Bond films across the 60s and 70s, and numerous other movies, from Dr Strangelove to Addams Family Values, Adam dreamed up the look of nuclear submarine bases, mountain

laboratories, hi-tech space stations, glamorous Las Vegas penthouses, and missile launchers hidden inside volcanoes. In doing so, he built some of the most memorable and influential spaces, not only in the history of cinema but also in the history of architecture, real or imagined.



A concept drawing for the volcano set in You Only Live Twice. Photograph: sammlungen@deutsche-kinemathek.de/© Deutsche Kinemathek – Ken Adam Archive

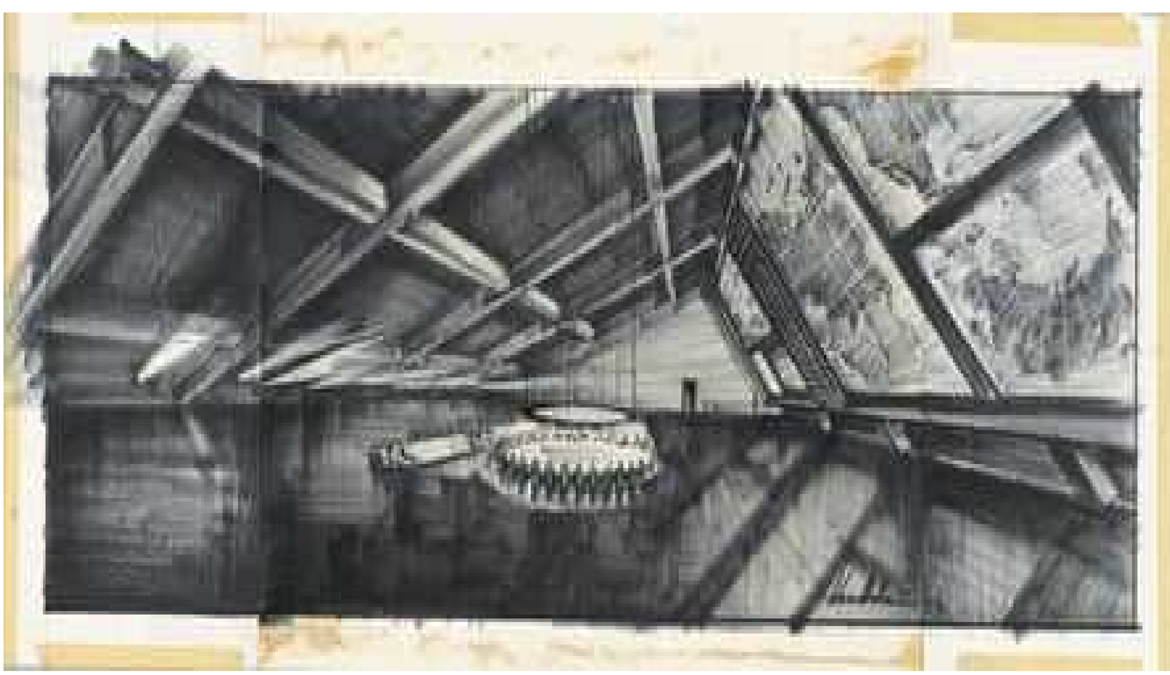
Today, his influence can be felt whenever you walk into a soaring office atrium, take a vertiginous escalator ride into a cavernous subway station, or even get shuttled through a tunnel between airport terminals. He was the master of a style he termed “heightened reality”, taking everyday spaces and giving them a theatrical, supercharged glamour.

Countless architects have copied it since. Norman Foster’s design for the cone-shaped room at the top of the Gherkin is perhaps the most Adam-esque space in London; his Faustino winery in Spain could be a Bond baddie’s lair. A longtime fan, Foster once described Adam as “a master of space and light”, who realised the kinds of spaces that the 18th-century architectural draughtsmen-dreamers, like Giovanni Piranesi and Étienne-Louis Boullée, had only imagined. “Those legendary architectural figures” had “hypothesised visually, graphically, environments of awesome power”, he

said. “Ken Adam builds them.”

Seven years after his death, the workings behind the magic have been brought together in a mammoth new Taschen book, The Ken Adam Archive, featuring interviews and production sketches from some of the 70 completed and 15 unrealised projects that he worked on over his 50-year career. Weighing in at 4kg, with the dimensions and heft of a paving slab, it feels like a suitably colossal tome to mark the mind behind the most ambitious film sets ever built.

Edited by the film historian Sir Christopher Frayling, a longtime friend of Adam’s, the book is peppered with revealing conversations between the two. The Bond series, for example, almost didn’t happen for Adam. When he received the initial treatment for Dr No in 1961, he wasn’t impressed. “You can’t possibly do this,” he recalls his wife, Maria Letizia, protesting at the time. “You would prostitute yourself.” Bond writer Ian Fleming himself admitted that his trashy spy novels had been conceived for consumption on “railways, trains, aeroplanes or beds”, while the producer Albert “Cubby” Broccoli described his own films before Bond as “profitable crap”. But Adam saw the potential and conjured some of the most striking spaces yet on the silver screen.



The final concept for the War Room in Dr Strangelove. Photograph: Ken Adam/Deutsche Kinemathek

Dr No's underwater apartment was a fantastical mashup of fashionable mid-century style and heirloom antiques – some of it from Adam's own house in Knightsbridge – with fake rocks framing a magnificent aquarium, and a real tree in the middle of the room. The film also featured a nuclear water reactor in a slick laboratory with dramatic, slanting columns and hi-tech control panels, with every detail supervised by scientists from the Atomic Energy Research Establishment in Oxfordshire.

"I knew nothing about reactors!" Adam recalls in the book. "And it had to work. Even though we didn't use radioactive material … It was really frightening, actually! We knew so little about it." You can see why he was nervous: this was his first film for Broccoli, and, in today's money, the set for the reactor room alone cost more than £110,000.

Still, that was nothing compared with what he would concoct five years later, at Pinewood Studios, for You Only Live Twice. In this epic, Bond tracks down Ernst Stavro Blofeld, the shadowy chief of criminal organisation Spectre, to his headquarters inside a dormant volcano in Japan (from where he is launching rockets to capture superpower space hardware and trigger a third world war, natch). The gargantuan set for the volcano lair included a movable helicopter platform, a working monorail system, a launch pad, and a full-scale rocket mock-up that could simulate lift-off. Visible from three miles away, it used 900 tons of steel and 200 tons of plaster (before carbon footprint was anyone's concern), and cost the equivalent of £7m today.

The book shows Adam's initial sketches for the sets, drawn with the characteristic high-contrast, energetic strokes of his black and brown felt-tip pens – his dynamic, layered lines emphasising the extreme-perspective views. And those felt-tips, it turns out, were crucial to the evolution of the Adam style.



‘A master of space and light’: Adam at his home desk. Photograph: © Boris Hars-Tschachotin, “THIS IS THE WAR ROOM” (2017). Film still by Andreas-Michael Velten

Born in Berlin in 1921, as Klaus Hugo George Fritz Adam, he arrived in London in 1934 after his family fled the Nazi regime. He went to St Paul’s school, then attended evening classes at University College London’s Bartlett School of Architecture – then a hotbed of fussy beaux arts classicism – while working as an architectural draughtsman during the day. As a result, his early drawings tended to be precise and technically proficient, made with pen and ink and a T-square. He would draw a neat plan and elevation to scale, before projecting it into a sketch, as architects are taught to do.

“I was afraid to let go and express myself,” Adam recalls. “The drawings were a kind of self-defence.” But everything changed with the arrival of the Flo-Master marker pen in 1951. “I had to try and find some way of releasing myself,” he continues. “With the help of felt pens – which had recently been invented – I changed my drawing technique completely.” He settled on the wedge-shaped tip. “Its broad strokes forced me to loosen up and made me design more boldly,” he recalls. “One or two lines might form the basis of my design, and often it is the imperfections of the sketch – with a bold

treatment of light and shade – which creates interesting compositions and atmosphere.”

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Drawing and set for the docking bay from The Spy Who Loved Me. Composite: Ken Adam/MGM/Rex Features

Flipping through the book's 360 pages, you can see Adam's style evolve from the uptight technical drawing of the early years, to the later exercises in chiaroscuro that flow with expressionist glee, as atmospheric and emotionally charged as any Piranesi etching.

In particular, his designs for the war room in Dr Strangelove, created for Stanley Kubrick in 1962, exude cold war menace in their thrusting triangular geometries. As Frayling describes, it was one part concrete bomb shelter, one part oval light-ring, one part animated map of the world showing the flight paths of nuclear bombers, and "three parts paranoia".

It went on to become everyone's idea of what the underground inner sanctum for plotting global warfare must surely look like. When Ronald Reagan, as newly elected US president, was given a tour of the Pentagon by his chief of staff in 1981, he is said to have asked: "But where is the war room?"

"Mr President," came the reply, "there isn't one." Ken Adam's imaginationcontinues to live on long after his death, inspiring the villainous look of movies, video games, buildings and space stations.

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2023.03.16 - Opinion

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Illustration by Ben Jennings

OpinionBudget 2023

Beware Hunt’s hype. There’s more poverty ahead and his budget did nothing to change that

Aditya Chakrabortty



The statement will be remembered for the childcare pledge, but there was nothing to meet the scale of Britain's economic malaise

Wed 15 Mar 2023 14.19 EDTLast modified on Wed 15 Mar 2023 17.47 EDT

I have spent more than 25 years covering budgets, because someone had to, and have learned one golden rule: for all the huff and puff, the ready reckoners and those blessed fan charts, most of what's said evaporates from the public consciousness by the weekend. Out of all Jeremy Hunt's promises today, only one will linger in the electorate's memory: providing working parents with 30 hours of free childcare during term time for their babies and toddlers.

Not that you'd know. The chancellor gave it only brief airtime and got far more excited at the idea of building "12 potential Canary Wharfs". But that's the only policy guaranteed to light up WhatsApp groups this evening and perhaps to be remembered by many voters at the ballot box. It is also, according to the Office for Budget Responsibility, the measure that will do most to boost the economy – more than the much costlier giveaways to business. The pledge is shot through with more holes than Clint Eastwood's

cowboy hat, as we shall see, but it also contains important clues for how politics will play out between now and the next election.

Who knew? It turns out that proposing a big solution to a big problem and spending a few billion to achieve it reaches those parts of the electorate that smaller beer cannot. It turns out that even would-be technocrats such as Hunt and Rishi Sunak can do it, if they try. You can already see the outlines of a Tory offer come an election in 2024: it will be the party that straps on a suit and does deals with Joe Biden and Ursula von der Leyen. It can pull on a pair of hobnails and boot the daylights out of an Afghan teenager in a small boat. And it can also flash the cash and spend big on a couple of signature populist policies.

There is a lesson here for Keir Starmer. For months, his party has been talking about the mad monetary maths of childcare and yet it has announced only the most piecemeal of remedies. Any time actual spending comes up, the entire shadow frontbench adopts the foetal position, except even babies know better than to spout nonsense about "sound money". The result is that Starmer's team is playing catch-up in an area that last autumn was all theirs.

There's plenty they can add, because the sector is in big trouble. Nurseries are closing in their thousands and pay for staff is an insult: an average salary in the sector is about £15,000 a year, while for the typical worker it is closer to £28,000. Private equity groups are buying their way into the industry and, as an academic report demonstrated last year, demanding an outsized return. Over the past decade, childcare has grown steadily more dependent on taxpayer subsidy, and fallen prey to shadow bankers who have no place in it. Besides, Hunt is only helping households where both parents work, and freezing out everyone else. Labour could produce a plan to clean out the sector and pay staff better in return for more money that will ensure parents actually get the promised 30 hours a week, rather than the fraction they typically get. Or perhaps Starmer will wait for another party to jump the queue with that idea, too.

Hunt's offer on childcare stands out because the rest of his speech was so dire. This was a budget for growth, he assured the house, but the biggest boast he could make was that the UK will avoid an actual recession. It will

just have something that feels like a recession, in the same way that that hacking cough you've had since Christmas isn't Covid but still feels awful. Over the next couple of years, households will endure the biggest drop in disposable income since records began. By March 2028, the OBR predicts, Britons' living standards will still be below where they were on the eve of the pandemic in March 2020.

As Hunt sat back down, hundreds of thousands of teachers, junior doctors, civil servants, Tube workers and BBC radio journalists were on strike in the biggest wave of industrial action for more than 30 years. Yet he had nothing to say on public sector pay, even though TUC analysis shows the typical public servant earns about £200 less a month than they did before George Osborne's first budget in 2010. He had zero to offer on investment in the public realm, even though this winter sick people died while waiting for ambulances and children will prepare for their summer exams in classrooms that are falling apart. Perhaps he is waiting until the next budget; more likely he and his government suffer a wilful blindness on the toll taken by their party's austerity. In one of his few jokes, Hunt referred to his age: at 56, he said, he isn't old, but "experienced". Well, in the part of London where I grew up, men have a healthy life expectancy of 56. I guess it depends whose experiences you want to address.

But the biggest problem of all stretches far wider than Hunt or Sunak or the Tories. It stretches across Westminster. All the main parties agree that what the economy must do is grow. Yet the economy is not growing by any more than a very mediocre rate. It has been like that since the banking crash of 2008 and nothing the chancellor announced today, not the investment zones nor the billions in tax giveaways for wealthy people or big businesses, will change that. Nor will anything up the shirt sleeves of Starmer: the respected City research firm Capital Economics has been through Labour's plans. Its verdict? "A tight grip on public finances is likely by whichever party is in charge … Labour may struggle to do much better than the Conservatives." In other words: we can change who's in charge, but they won't change what they do.

It's high time for our politicians to wean themselves off the heady opiate of an imaginary boom. Time to face facts: the UK is a rich country that has

enough money to ensure children don't freeze and their parents don't starve. Let us work out what our people need, in housing and healthcare and education, and provide it, by redistributing resources from those who hoard them. As Keynes said in the depths of the second world war: "Anything we can actually do we can afford." This will be harder now that the era of nearly-free money is over, as proved by the current ructions in the banking industry. But that exposes how many of our supposedly economic battles are really political – about who gets what and who comes away with nothing. So let's have those battles. The rest of the economic puzzle will fall into place. Or perhaps you actually like the idea of a dozen, a hundred Canary Wharfs?

- Aditya Chakrabortty is a Guardian columnist and senior economics commentator. He was last week named columnist of the year (broadsheet) at the Press Awards

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How much? … a state-of-the-art cargo bike. Photograph: AJ Watt/Getty Images

OpinionCycling

£3,999 for a cargo bike?! How a new kind of class politics arrived on Britain's streets

Adrian Chiles



There are two kinds of people pedalling those ungainly bikes you see everywhere – and only one can afford the price tag

Thu 16 Mar 2023 03.00 EDTLast modified on Thu 16 Mar 2023 10.39 EDT

Some time in the early years of this century a new kind of bicycle, or rather tricycle, appeared on the roads around me. They were big, heavy things with open wooden boxes bolted on the front. In these boxes sat a small child or two being transported to or from nursery or primary or prep school. In the saddle perched a pedalling parent, red of cheek and heavy of breath. The determined look on their faces conveyed something along the muttered lines of: "This is a good idea, the right thing to do – good for the kids and good for me," repeated with every revolution of the pedals.

To my mind, though undoubtedly noble in purpose, these machines were a worry. They looked a bit Heath Robinson to me, like something my dad might have cobbled together for my brother and me to lark about with. The kids in the box always looked so vulnerable, sitting there at white-van exhaust-pipe height. And unless the parent was super-fit, pedalling miles every morning, I couldn't see how they were an alternative to car use. More likely they were an alternative to walking. Not for me.

> I glanced at the price tag, walked on, did a double take, and took a closer look

Over the years these things have proliferated, some with electric motors, looking a bit fancier, sporting boxes made of nicer wood or some technical fabric, perhaps with rain hoods. I'd stopped noticing them, but out walking with the dog one day last month, I saw one for sale outside a bike shop. I glanced at the price tag, walked on, did a double take, and took a closer look. I was having trouble with some new contact lenses, so I gave my eyes a bit of a rub to make sure I wasn't seeing things. £3,999! I swear even the dog stood stock still and went "Huh?" in the manner of Scooby-Doo. I scanned the pavement in case a decimal point had fallen off, but no joy. Four grand! Who knew?

And now all I see is cargo bikes, which I notice fall into two categories. There are the four-grand ones, pedalled by (obviously) affluent parents. But most of them, probably just as expensive, are ridden by the decidedly unaffluent, slogging around being paid peanuts to supply the affluent with takeaways and assorted other essentials of modern life.

- Adrian Chiles is a broadcaster, writer and Guardian columnist

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Rishi Sunak welcomes girls to Downing Street for a football training session, but are existing school structures able to adapt to a pledge to allow more girls access to football and other sports? Photograph: Simon Walker/No 10 Downing Street

Sport

After Lionesses roar, the government’s pledge on school physical education is a whimper

Cath Bishop



Government’s response to demand for Euros to have a legacy wafts at school sport structures that were not fit for purpose

Thu 16 Mar 2023 04.00 EDTLast modified on Thu 16 Mar 2023 17.02 EDT

Wasn’t it brilliant to see the Lionesses back on our screens recently, dribbling balls with schoolgirls outside No 10 Downing Street as the government responded to their campaign to improve PE? They are truly inspirational players and people. It felt good to relive the highs of the Euros last summer, stuck in this never-ending winter. But before we all sink into a huge sigh of relief that our children’s health is fixed and England’s entitlement to win major football trophies in perpetuity sorted, we must pause and question what’s actually changed and whether this will improve the country’s long-term health.

Firstly, why does it take a sustained high-profile campaign from England’s elite women footballers to get the government to address something so fundamental to health? Secondly, on a closer look, what has actually changed? In England and Scotland there is already government guidance that schools should provide a minimum of two hours of physical education a week. The funding announced is not new – it continues existing levels of Primary PE and Sport Premium funding (now confirmed so late, many

schools already had plans to reduce sports provision). There is nothing additional to support the "equal access" commitment despite confused reporting suggesting there is. And the outdated existing model and concept of PE remains unfit for purpose, and another opportunity is missed to connect PE into a broader perspective and proactive strategy towards health.

The announcement focused on figures: numbers of girls getting football lessons at school, hours of physical activity per week for pupils and funding. These all count, but yet again we have forgotten that the real impact comes from what happens qualitatively. If we want to create healthier habits and children who go on to remain active throughout their lives, the quality of those PE hours is vital. If more girls are to access football and other sports, are existing structures in school able to adapt?

I heard nothing about investment to help schools with limited changing rooms, dilapidated facilities and a lack of staff. We have siloed off PE in our schools for years, seeing it as something additional or optional, rather than thinking about how fundamental movement is to a young person's growth and development.

The chief medical officer recommends 60 minutes of activity every day which fewer than half our children achieve. But there is no holistic plan for how to keep our children active at school beyond minimum hours of PE or after-school sport clubs. Even the name "physical education" feels vastly outdated, given all we know about the mental and emotional (and academic) benefits of being physically active and how impossible it is to separate our brains from our bodies.

There is no longer-term perspective in sight either. Sport England's figures on participation in physical activity over the last decade show that things have been going in the wrong direction. Despite the euphoria of hosting London 2012, barely anyone got up off the sofa to do more exercise than they had been doing before. That is a problem from so many perspectives, including the importance of keeping everyone healthy and fit, staying in employment and contributing to the wider life of the nation.



Jill Scott signs an England shirt for Rishi Sunak, but beyond the PR-heavy pledge to address physical education, the focus remains on quantity rather than quality. Photograph: Simon Walker/No 10 Downing Street

We need to start seeing school sport within the broader context of a healthy life rather than quadrennial elite tournament results. This can't only be about inspiring the next generation of Lionesses. That is only one part of the picture. We need school to imbue pupils with a love of physical activity, to feel good moving their bodies, to see movement as key to a natural, healthy life and a vital support mechanism to help in the difficult times, as well as an integral part of the good times.

Our concept of school sport remains too narrow, I fear still based on what happened on the fields of Eton long ago. It excludes many children who don't connect with classic offerings of rugby or football, revolves too much around who are the best kids who will make the first team and help the school win the local league, rather than helping children to connect with their bodies, feel comfortable learning to move in them and finding the myriad ways there are to be active beyond football, rugby and hockey. Don't get me wrong, I love those sports and I want them to thrive at grassroots and elite levels – but I also want everyone who doesn't feel part of those sports to have a route to a healthy, active life.

An interesting concept would be to inspire our children and our schools to prepare for the "Centenarian Olympics", a concept that requires us to answer one question: What would you like to be able to do physically given the assumption that you will get to live to at least 100 years of age? And what do you need to be doing now to set yourself up for that? It requires a different mindset and perspective on physical development – and facilitates skills of long-term thinking useful across the curriculum.

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Like the rest of England, I loved watching the Lionesses win at Wembley last summer. They are brilliant, but elite athletes will always be brilliant outliers. Statistics and standards demand it. We should beware the dangers of building school sport around finding future Olympians and Lionesses. Our solutions need to include the other 99.9% of children who we want to play their part in active, healthy communities

throughout their lives. That requires a fundamental rethink of PE and youth sport. Let's not kid ourselves that the recent PR-heavy announcement has moved us forward yet on that vital challenge.

The headline of this article was amended on 16 March 2023 because an earlier version referred to the UK when England was meant.

Cath Bishop is an Olympic rowing medallist, leadership and culture coach, and author of The Long Win

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‘I’d argue that Weight Watchers is not so much in the weight-loss business. It is in the money-churning business.’ Photograph: Brendan McDermid/Reuters

OpinionDiets and dieting

Weight Watchers wins when our diets fail – it won’t change society’s broken thinking around food

Susie Orbach



The diet industry benefits if you become a customer for life: its profits soar with our failures

Thu 16 Mar 2023 04.00 EDTLast modified on Thu 16 Mar 2023 12.31 EDT

It’s no surprise that shares in Weight Watchers International surged more than 70% earlier this month after its acquisition of Sequence, a US telehealth service linking patients with doctors who can prescribe semaglutide medications, which suppress appetite and are being used for weight loss. I’d argue that Weight Watchers is not so much in the weight-loss business. It is in the money-churning business.

Repeat customers and subscription customers fuel business. Studies have shown that 97% of dieters regain everything they have lost within three years – the ideal backdrop for Weight Watchers and big diet companies, who see their customers returning again and again. There will be a stream of repeat customers as long as we have a culture of inducing in people a feeling that they risk being that hated state, “fat”; a feeling that starts anywhere up from being tiny.

What is the solution? As a parliamentary inquiry discovered in 2012, Weight Watchers' appeal rests on claims that some evidence shows a modest weight loss of up to 10% of body weight can be achieved. But as studies have shown, weight loss through calorie-restricted diets is not sustained. Only three in a hundred people maintain the weight loss, while the other 97 are there to start subscribing again.

I'm not saying semaglutide (sold under the brandnames Wegovy and Ozempic, though Ozempic isn't licensed for weight loss) can't be useful. It operates by suppressing appetite, which could make a real difference for some people – but that only works for as long as you're taking the drug, and it doesn't address crucial related issues. Most of the so-called weight management programmes funded by the NHS prescribe some form of dieting or another. They don't address what food longings are about. They don't explore the difficulties people can experience psychologically with being the size they strive to be, or the dilemmas they encounter emotionally if they reach their goal. They don't explore appetite and how to eat when you are hungry, eat the foods that will satisfy that hunger, and the difficulties of stopping when you are full.

Intuitive eating, which I proposed in 1978 and has since been thankfully taken up by many including AnyBody UK and Health at Every Size, involves understanding the psychological and social mechanisms involved in troubled eating. It offers solutions to help people break the pattern of weight cycling. It points to ways to address emotional needs without transposing them into food needs.

Eating with one's hunger, and being conscious enough to stop when one is full, is hard to do in our culture where food is sold as aspirational and is designed with the precise amounts of salt, sugar or fat to hit what's called the "bliss point", not nutritional values. Linked to that is the selling of "perfected" bodies as a way of belonging and self-branding.

The growth of disordered and troubled eating is a tragic story. It is tragic for the individual, tragic for the family and costly for us as a society. It can occupy minds from when we first wake up in the morning to the promises we make to ourselves at night, in which evaluation of what has been eaten as if it were a criminal act is accompanied by what needs to be forsworn since

eating is viewed as a moral currency. The tragedy and the horror is compounded by the profit-seeking private equity and hedge funds that see eating disorders as an attractive growth industry to invest in.

The overconsumption-underconsumption model of food will continue to keep the profits coming in. The intergenerational transmission of body- and eating-distress ensures that. Tension around food and bodies marks the next generation. Not advertently, of course. Every parent wishes to give their kid the best possible start, but blanketing pregnancy and the post-partum period with a stress on getting one's body back treats the momentous experience of pregnancy and giving birth as a physical blip that should quickly be rendered invisible.

Early life should involve parents and babies getting to know each other and decoding differing needs – those for comfort, those for cuddles, those for sleep, those for thirst, those for food, those for just being; what goes in and out of the mothering person's body and the baby's body is paramount. But instead, a series of preoccupations – aesthetic, nutritional, economic and so on – can combine to undermine an easy response to a baby's appetite. Tension in the early feeding environment can accompany a child throughout their life, and lead to them seeking more control over food and mucking about with their appetite and satiety in a search for comfort.

Weight Watchers and its allies in the diet industry benefit if you become a partner for life. Their profits soar with our failures. Surely if their products worked really well, to a degree that goes anywhere close to addressing the scale of the problem, they'd become redundant? Fat chance.

There is a bigger phenomenon. It's bodies weaponised for profit while all around are rates of extreme body distress, stealing the lives of children and young people.

- Susie Orbach is a psychotherapist, psychoanalyst and social critic. She is the author of many books including Bodies and Fat is a Feminist Issue

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Donald Trump's lawyers argue hush money payments to Stormy Daniels, pictured, are not a breach of campaign laws. Photograph: Markus Schreiber/AP

Donald Trump

Stormy Daniels: Donald Trump legal team 'pushes for end to hush money case'

Lawyers understood to have argued that payments would have been made regardless of presidential run and did not use campaign funds

Hugo Lowell in New York
@hugolowell
Thu 16 Mar 2023 01.00 EDTLast modified on Thu 16 Mar 2023 17.47 EDT

Donald Trump's legal team recently urged the Manhattan district attorney's office not to indict the former president over his role in paying hush money to a porn star, arguing that the payments would have been made irrespective

of his 2016 presidential candidacy, sources familiar with the matter have said.

The lawyer who represented the Trump team at the meeting with the district attorney's office, Susan Necheles, also argued that campaign funds had not been used for the payments to the porn star, known as Stormy Daniels, and were therefore not a violation of campaign finance laws.

The arguments presented to the district attorney's office mark the most formal defense that the Trump team have raised to date, as they attempt to settle on a strategy to avoid conviction in the event that the former president is charged with a misdemeanour or felony over the payments.

Trump may face an uphill struggle with those arguments, given the fact that having "mixed motives" to protect himself personally and to protect his campaign could leave him liable, and the timing of the payments suggests there was an urgency to pay the money before the end of the 2016 campaign.

The effort to convince the district attorney, Alvin Bragg, not to bring charges may also prove futile amid increasing signals that an indictment is likely.

On Wednesday, Trump's former lawyer Michael Cohen testified for around two hours before the grand jury and told the Guardian that he provided the most complete account of the hush money scheme. He added that every juror asked a question, which suggested a particularly engaged grand jury.

That is a typical sign for prosecutors as they weigh potential charges, legal experts say, because it could indicate the grand jury found him to be a compelling witness – and a jury at an eventual trial might be similarly convinced.

Cohen is the crucial witness because he made the $130,000 payment to Daniels in late October 2016, buying her silence about the story of an affair with Trump. Trump later reimbursed him as president, through monthly $35,000 checks from his personal checking account, and Cohen pleaded guilty in 2018 to federal charges involving the hush money.

The district attorney's case is likely to focus on how Trump and the Trump Organization handled the reimbursements. According to court filings in the federal case, the Trump Organization falsely recorded the payments as legal expenses, referencing a legal retainer with Cohen that did not exist.

Falsifying business records can be a misdemeanour in New York. But it can rise to a felony if prosecutors can show beyond a reasonable doubt that a defendant's "intent to defraud" included an effort to commit or conceal a second crime.

What is unclear in this investigation is the potential second crime, though Bragg could tie the falsification to a violation of state election law, arguing the payment to Daniels was an illicit contribution to the Trump campaign, given the money stifled Daniels and helped his campaign.

Also on Wednesday, Daniels herself met with the district attorney's office at their request, her lawyer said in a tweet. Daniels responded to questions, he said, "and has agreed to make herself available as a witness, or for further inquiry if needed".

The district attorney's office has questioned at least seven other people before the grand jury and Cohen was expected to be one of the final witnesses to make an appearance. Trump was also recently invited to testify, but his legal team is understood to have declined the offer.

The recent moves by the district attorney suggest criminal charges against Trump could be imminent. It would be rare for a prosecutor to question essentially every relevant witness in a high-profile white-collar criminal case and ultimately decline to seek an indictment.

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Honduran and Taiwanese flags fly at Republic of China Square in Tegucigalpa. Taipei has warned Honduras of China's 'debt trap' diplomacy. Photograph: AFP/Getty Images

Taiwan

Don't 'quench your thirst with poison', Taiwan tells Honduras after switch to China

Taiwan foreign ministry warns of China debt trap, as US says Beijing 'makes many promises that are unfulfilled'

Rhoda Kwan in Taipei
Thu 16 Mar 2023 02.21 EDTLast modified on Thu 16 Mar 2023 02.23 EDT

Taiwan has urged Honduras not to "quench your thirst with poison and fall into China's debt trap", adding it would not compete monetarily with China to keep its formal allies after its decision to switch diplomatic ties from Taipei to Beijing this week.

Honduran president Xiomara Castro announced on Tuesday that her country would begin to establish an official relationship with Beijing, in effect severing its ties with Taipei.

Her foreign minister, Eduardo Enrique Reina, said on Wednesday the country had asked Taiwan to double its annual aid to $100m and renegotiate its debt to the island, a request he said went unanswered. The Central American country is struggling to repay its international debts, including $600m owed to Taiwan. “Honduras’ needs are enormous, and we haven’t seen that answer from Taiwan,” the minister said.

In response, Taiwan’s foreign ministry said Reina’s statements “did not reflect the whole truth” of the negotiations and that the ministry had “actively” engaged in bilateral talks with Castro’s government. “Our communication efforts with Honduras have never stopped,” the ministry said on Thursday, adding it was trying its best to maintain its friendship with Honduras.

“We urge Honduras, which is already suffering from debt problems, to not quench your thirst with poison and fall into China’s debt trap”, the ministry said in its statement.

Taiwan’s response comes as the US warned Honduras that Beijing may not follow through on its promises of financial investment and aid.

“The Honduran government should be aware that the PRC (People’s Republic of China) makes many promises that are unfulfilled,” a state department spokesperson said on Wednesday, adding the department was closely monitoring the situation.

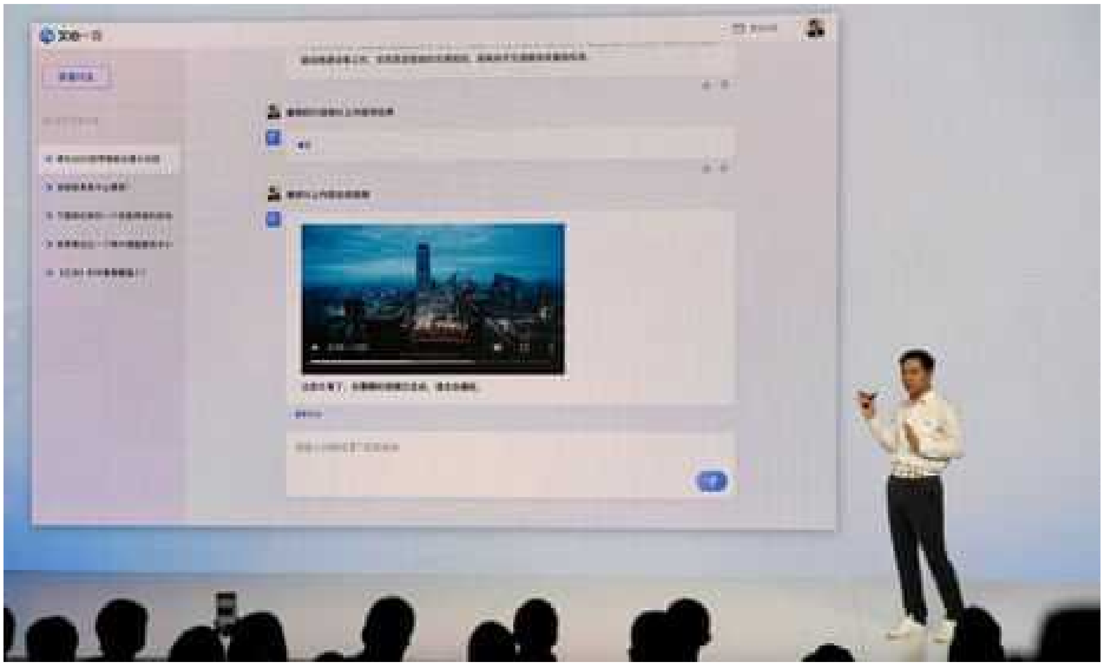
Honduras’ diplomatic switch leaves Taiwan with 13 countries that recognise it as a country. China does not allow any of its diplomatic allies to recognise Taipei in an effort to isolate the island democracy from the international community. Beijing claims self-ruled Taiwan as its own territory, and has not ruled out the use of force in attempts to “re-unify” it with China.

China’s foreign ministry spokesperson, Wang Wenbin, hailed Honduras’ decision as “the right choice that accords with the trend of history and our times” on Wednesday.

Honduras becomes the latest Central American country to sever ties with Taiwan to pursue relations with China, as Beijing seeks to assert its international influence amid souring tensions with the West.

Beijing incentivises countries with promises of investment and trade in return for siding with its narrative on its claim to Taiwan. China has already invested $298m in a first dam in eastern Honduras inaugurated in January 2021.

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Baidu’s chief executive, Robin Li, introduces Ernie Bot at an event in Beijing on Thursday. Photograph: Ng Han Guan/AP

China

Chinese ChatGPT rival from search engine firm Baidu fails to impress

Shares plummet after Ernie Bot AI chatbot software falls short of expectations at unveiling in Beijing

Rhoda Kwan and agencies
Thu 16 Mar 2023 05.28 EDTLast modified on Thu 16 Mar 2023 08.23 EDT

The Chinese search engine company Baidu’s shares have fallen by as much as 10% after it presented its ChatGPT-like artificial intelligence software, with investors unimpressed by the bot’s display of linguistic and maths skills.

The AI-powered ChatGPT, created by the San Francisco company OpenAI, has caused a sensation for its ability to write essays, poems and

programming code on demand within seconds, prompting widespread fears over cheating or of professions becoming obsolete.

Chinese tech companies have joined the global rush to develop rival software, with Alibaba and JD.com announcing similar projects.

But Baidu's Ernie Bot, unveiled at a press event in Beijing on Thursday, fell short of expectations, with the company's co-founder and chief executive, Robin Li, showing only a prerecorded demonstration of the software's capabilities, rather than a live interaction.

The company showed audiences a video of the bot answering questions about the popular Chinese science fiction novel The Three-Body Problem and generating a plot summary. It also displayed Ernie Bot's algebra skills and generated audio in Sichuanese and Hakka dialects of Chinese.

Baidu's Hong Kong-listed shares plunged immediately after the software was unveiled, sliding by more than 10% at one point. They recovered slightly afterwards, down about 7% on Thursday afternoon.

The company launched Ernie Bot in a grand media conference in its Beijing headquarters that was livestreamed on YouTube and other platforms on Thursday. Ernie, which stands for "enhanced representation through knowledge integration", is powered by a deep-learning AI model developed by Baidu that draws on the data from its search engine.

Li said the technology was still flawed but was being released to meet huge customer demand. "Our expectations for Ernie Bot are close to ChatGPT, even GPT-4," Li said, referring to OpenAI's latest chatbot technology launched this week.

He said about 650 companies had already signed on to become part of the chatbot's ecosystem, which would be integrated into Baidu's other products, as well as bolster other technology including the cloud and driverless cars.

Aimed primarily at the Chinese market, Ernie Bot's Chinese-language understanding extends to Chinese dialects. Li in the prerecorded videos showed how the chatbot answered questions and solved maths equations.

The bot was also seen being asked to write a Chinese poem with a Chinese idiom, generate images and text, as well as suggest business names and slogans.

Baidu is the first Chinese tech company to launch its contender in the blossoming chatbot space. Other Chinese companies, including ByteDance and Tencent, have announced plans to launch their own AI chatbots.

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The demand generated by ChatGPT's success prompted a race among the country's tech companies to develop a Chinese equivalent. But China's strict censorship and US restrictions on chip sales could limit Baidu and other Chinese contenders' AI ambitions.

ChatGPT is blocked in China, but the American software is gaining a base of Chinese users who use virtual private networks to get around the ban, deploying it to write essays and cram for exams.

Li warned against seeing the technology through the lens of US-China tensions. "Ernie Bot is not a tool of confrontation between China and the United States," he said.

The Chinese president, Xi Jinping, called for China to become more self-reliant through its own innovations in science and technology in a speech

earlier this week.

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A counter-narcotics officer runs through a coca field during a raid on a lab in Putumayo state, Colombia. Photograph: Fernando Vergara/AP

Americas

Cocaine smuggling and production at record high since pandemic retreat

New UN report says there has been a 35% spike in 2020-21 in the production of coca, the drug's base ingredient

Luke Taylor in Bogotá
Thu 16 Mar 2023 02.00 EDTLast modified on Fri 17 Mar 2023 13.06 EDT

South American drug cartels have capitalised on the retreat of the Covid-19 pandemic to produce and smuggle record amounts of cocaine around the world.

Production of coca, the drug's base ingredient, spiked 35% in 2020-21, surpassing pre-pandemic levels, according to a new report from the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC).

The increase in coca production is the highest since 2016 and has been accompanied by the continued trend of South American cartels improving the efficiency of their jungle labs where they can extract more of the illicit white powder from the green coca leaves.

"The pandemic was a bit of a blip for the expansion of cocaine production, but now it has rebounded and is even higher than what it was before," said Antoine Vella, a UNODC researcher working on the report.

Cartels were forced to stockpile mass quantities of cocaine early in the pandemic when flights were suddenly grounded and road traffic heavily policed, but they quickly devised new ways of operating.

Major drug busts revealed cocaine to be cleverly concealed inside avocados, face masks and even crates full of squid on cargo ships.

In the most sophisticated of cases the drug was chemically broken down, mixed into liquids, waxes and fabrics so it could not be seen, and then extracted and transformed back into a powder at its destination.

Despite record cocaine seizures of nearly 2,000 tons in 2021, anti-narcotics efforts have only slowed down the growth of cocaine smuggling as it continues to meet the rapacious global demand for the drug.

"There's no question that there is no limit to the ingenuity of traffickers," Vella said.

Cartels are also devising new routes to avoid the watchful eye of anti-narcotics agents and are looking to expand into nascent but rapidly growing markets such as Asia and Africa, the report says.

The amount of cocaine flowing through North Sea ports such as Antwerp, Rotterdam and Hamburg now eclipses those in Spain and Portugal, historically the drug's gateway into western Europe.

Ports in west and central Africa are also increasingly favoured hubs to ferry cocaine to Europe while more cocaine is passing through South Africa on its way to riskier, more remote destinations, such as Australia.

Demand for cocaine is currently concentrated in the Americas and Western and Central Europe. The regions are home to one-fifth of the world's population and three-quarters of its cocaine consumers.

Countries such as Brazil – South America's largest cocaine consumer – are seeing a spike in overdoses, however, suggesting they are seeing rapidly growing supply and consumption.

"I think we need to shift away from thinking of cocaine as being a European/North American problem because it's also very much a South American problem," Vella says.

The growing global demand for production has been met by a surge in coca cultivation in Bolivia, Peru and, particularly, Colombia.

The amount of land used for Colombian coca cultivation increased by more than 40% in 2021, reaching 204,000 hectares.

Cartels have also become more efficient at extracting cocaine from the little green shrubs.

The demobilisation of Colombia's largest guerrilla group, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (Farc), has been followed by the emergence of new criminal groups who operate in a more competitive and efficient cocaine market, the UNODC says.

Farc once controlled vast swaths of the country in which it monopolised the drug market but most of the group's guerrillas laid down their weapons in 2016 as part of a landmark peace deal.

Crop substitution efforts have failed and the Farc's power vacuum was quickly filled by myriad smaller groups – including a growing number working with Mexican cartels.

They operate in a freer market where better prices can be offered than the ones during the Farc monopoly, Vella says.

The Farc demobilisation has also made it safer for other crime factions and rebel groups to focus on their business matters, said Jorge Restrepo, director

of the Bogotá-based Resource Center for Conflict Analysis (Cerac).

“The group with the largest capacity to exert violence suddenly disappeared – and that in itself is an incentive for the production of coca and cocaine,” Restrepo says.

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South Korea's president Yoon Suk Yeol and Japan's prime minister Fumio Kishida will share omurice during the visit. Photograph: Ahn Jung-won/AP

South Korea

Yoon arrives in Japan for historic talks with Kishida - and beloved omurice

Leaders expected to use first summit since 2011 to address Japan's use of Korean forced labour, as well as threats posed by North Korea and China

Justin McCurry in Tokyo
Thu 16 Mar 2023 00.45 EDTLast modified on Thu 16 Mar 2023 01.06 EDT

Yoon Suk Yeol will be treated to his favourite dish – omelette rice – when he becomes the first South Korean president to visit Japan in more than a decade on Thursday, as hopes rise for an end to years of animosity between the north-east Asian neighbours.

Given that the menu for official dinners has been a diplomatic flashpoint between the two countries, efforts by Yoon's hosts to accommodate his

palate are evidence of the recent thaw in relations, as regional tensions rise over North Korean missiles and Chinese military activity.

Yoon and Kishida are expected to use the first summit between Japanese and South Korean leaders since 2011 to address thorny bilateral issues, including Japan's use of Korean forced labour before and during the second world war.

The countries have also been locked in a dispute over the so-called "comfort women" – tens of thousands of mainly Korean women and girls who were forced to work in Japanese military brothels during Japan's 1910-45 colonial rule over the Korean peninsula. The countries also have competing claims to the Takeshima-Dokdo islands, which are administered by South Korea.

After years of wrangling over the countries' bitter wartime legacy, officials in Tokyo are playing up Yoon's affection for Japan, and apparently rewarding him with a dinner of omurice – fried rice encased in an omelette – at Rengatei, a 128-year-old restaurant in the capital's upmarket Ginza neighbourhood.

The request for the dish came from Yoon himself, according to the Yomiuri Shimbun. Rengatei, which opened in 1895, was apparently chosen to host Yoon and Japan's prime minister, Fumio Kishida, after the South Korean newspaper Dong-A Ilbo said Yoon had spoken fondly of a "certain restaurant" during a conversation with a Japanese official before he became president in 2022.



Omurice served with tomato sauce. Photograph: kumacore/Getty Images

In an interview with the Yomiuri on the eve of his visit, Yoon, whose father once taught at Hitotsubashi University in Tokyo, said his earliest memories of Japan were of clean streets and honest people.

“I expect that normalising bilateral relations will not only serve the interests of both countries, but also will send a very positive sign to the international community,” he told the newspaper.

When they are not bonding over dinner, the two leaders will try to build on a recent improvement in relations, as they attempt to address North Korea’s nuclear and ballistic weapons programmes and reset trade and security cooperation.

The challenge posed by Kim Jong-un’s regime was underlined on Thursday morning when it launched an intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) that landed in the sea off the northernmost Japanese island of Hokkaido. It was the North’s first ICBM launch in a month, and its third weapons test this week.

“Peace and stability in the region are important for the region, and we must further strengthen cooperation among allies and like-minded countries,” Kishida said, referring to the missile launch.

The US welcomed the two-day summit, which comes after sustained pressure from Washington on Tokyo and Seoul to mend ties and work together to address regional security concerns.

The meeting will be a "tangible manifestation" of the efforts made by the US allies to advance their relationship, state department spokesperson Ned Price said, adding that "the three of us have an especially important trilateral relationship".

Bilateral ties sank to their lowest point in decades in 2018 after South Korea's supreme court ordered two Japanese companies, Nippon Steel and Mitsubishi Heavy Industries, to compensate some of their former Korean employees for forcing them to work during the war.

An estimated 780,000 Koreans were conscripted into forced labour by Japan during colonial rule, according to South Korean data.

Japan has insisted that all compensation claims were settled "completely and finally" by a 1965 bilateral treaty that included $800m in economic aid and loans from Tokyo.

Hopes for a resolution to the dispute rose last week when the South Korean government announced it would set up a foundation to compensate former forced labourers without Japan's involvement. In return, the Japanese government reaffirmed previous statement of remorse over its colonial rule and said it would lift export controls, imposed in 2019, on materials needed by South Korea's semiconductor industry.

Kishida welcomed the compensation plan and spoke of "bolstering relations" during Yoon's visit. But the measure has angered some of the victims, who say it falls short of their demand for a full apology and direct compensation from the Japanese companies involved.

Recent polls found that nearly 60% of South Koreans opposed the compensation scheme, while 57% of Japanese supported it.

"Japan has expressed deep remorse and heartfelt apology in regard to its past colonial rule through the position of its previous governments," Yoon said.

The leaders, who last met in November on the sidelines of an Asean summit in Cambodia, will also discuss Chinese military activity and disruption to the supply chain. Japan said the “strategic challenge posed by China is the biggest Japan has ever faced” in a defence strategy paper released in December.

“There is an increasing need for South Korea and Japan to cooperate in this time,” Yoon said.

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